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ABSTRACT

The literature selections serving as the basis for writing assignments in the articles in this journal issue range from time-honored English classics ("Beowulf," "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight") and American standards ("A Farewell to Arms," "The Scarlet Letter") to contemporary fiction. The articles deal with works by women writers (Shirley Jackson, Caroline Gordon, Willa Cather, Kate Chopin, and Toni Bambara) and works especially suited for both high school (Harper's "To Kill a Mockingbird") and college study (Coover's "The Babysitter"). The assignments in the articles call not only for critical analysis but also for responding in journals, imaginative rewriting, imitating style, and using writing as a reading strategy. Some assignments in the articles ask for student response and imaginative projection, whereas others demand a rigorous examination of the text, with writing leading to a better understanding of the work as literature. (Author/HOD)

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WRITING ASSIGNMENTS BASED ON LITERARY WORKS

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ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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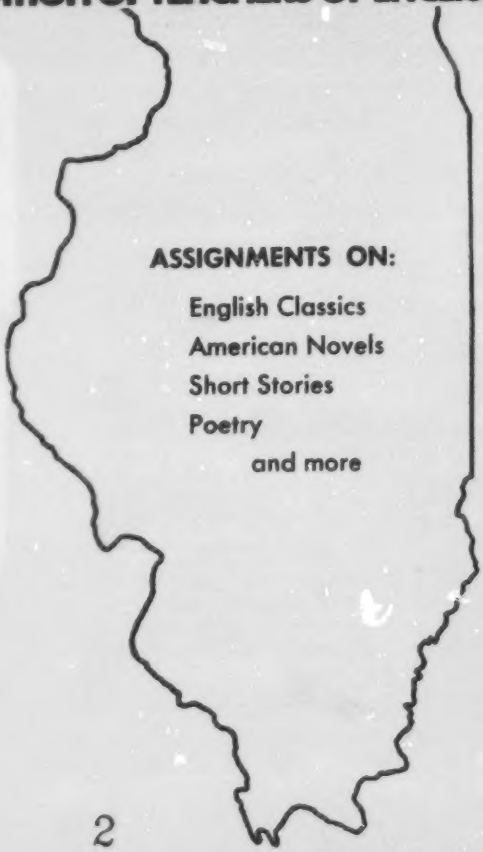

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ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

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About This Issue

The literature serving as the basis for writing assignments in this issue ranges from time-honored English classics (*Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) and American standards (*A Farewell to Arms, The Scarlet Letter*) to contemporary fiction. Women writers are well represented (Shirley Jackson, Caroline Gordon, Willa Cather, Kate Chopin and Toni Bambara) and there are works especially suited for both high school (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) and college study (Coover's "The Babysitter"). The assignments show tremendous variety, too, calling not only for critical analysis but for responding in journals, imaginative rewriting, the imitation of style and the use of writing as a reading strategy. Student response and imaginative projection are the goals in some assignments whereas others demand a rigorous examination of the text, with writing leading to a better understanding of the work as literature. You should find ways to vary your approach to familiar material as well as suggestions to lead you to new fiction worthy of class time.

I want especially to thank Lee Mulcrone of James B. Conant High School in Hoffman Estates for his valuable assistance in the solicitation of manuscripts.

Dorothy Matthews
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Writing in the American Novel Class: My Debt to Clarence

Marti Swanson
Grant Community High School
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In 1968, Clarence Hach, then of Evanston Township High School and later President of IATE, was a speaker at the first IATE Fall Conference I ever attended. He cited Arthur Draper, R. Baird Shuman, and Wallace Stegner on the relationship between the composing process and clear thinking. The presentation was a memorable one. He articulated well how writing can force us to think new thoughts, to see new relationships, and thus to discover "ultimate meaning." Composition, he said, is "the act of shaping thought, and . . . the act of composition forces thought. . . ." He quoted Professor Stegner: "We do not write what we know; we write what we want to find out." It is this perspective — that writing is discovery — that I have found particularly apt in literature courses.

"The American Novel" is a junior-senior elective I have taught for more than a dozen years. Those who choose the course are primarily college-bound students; some, however, are simply teens whose formal education will end with high school graduation but who love to read. During the semester, students start with either Hawthorne or Twain and then read Dreiser, Steinbeck, and Hemingway. The course goals include such things as becoming acquainted with major American novelists, with characteristics and traditions of the novel, and with different types of fiction. Equally important, however, is guiding students as they learn to make inferences from their reading. Since the composing process stimulates thinking, one of the best ways to help — or force — students to draw conclusions is through writing assignments. Such written work asks them to assimilate the topics they have been reading about and discussing daily in class, to look at those topics in a new light or from a new angle, and to write a well-organized essay on the insights they have gained.

The following essay assignments are among those I have used in the novel course. Most should be completed during the class period in which the students get the assignment; a few are more appropriate for an overnight effort. The class often begins with *The Scarlet Letter.*

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne's primary concern is with the EFFECTS of sin on the lives of both the main characters and the Puritan community as a whole. He presents these effects of sin in the three scaffold scenes (Chapters 1-3, "Chapter 12 — The Minister's [Midnight] Vigil," and Chapters 21-24).

Write a well-organized essay which includes an introductory paragraph and a paragraph on each of the following: Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, Rober Chillingworth, Pearl, and the Puritan community.

First, identify the sin or sins of each person or group (except Pearl, who is essentially sinless). Then trace the effects of that person's or group's sin(s), as well as the effects of the sins of others, on that person/group as Hawthorne presents these effects in the three scaffold scenes.

In a final paragraph, briefly explain which sin Hawthorne considered the truly damning one. What makes this sin worse than all the others?

Sometimes the class elects to begin with Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*. Both of the following assignments work well with this book:

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court ultimately satirizes the concept of human "progress." In a well-organized essay, note what kinds of progress the Yankee introduces into sixth century England. (i.e., What changes — philosophical, attitudinal, cultural, and/or material — does he make or try to make in educational, religious, social, military, economic, and political institutions?)

Which of these changes bring (or could bring) actual improvement? Are there any disadvantages to these same changes?

Which of these changes bring (or could bring) regression?

Based on your assessment of the Yankee's brand of "progress," does Twain consider "progress" a good or bad thing?

Do YOU agree with Twain's attitude toward "progress"? Defend your answer.

Alternately:

The "Preface" to Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* implies that the book is, ostensibly, to be a satire on the social customs, economic arrangements, and political and religious institutions of sixth century England. However, Twain also satirizes nineteenth century American practices, both directly and indirectly.

What characteristics of American life does Twain ridicule or condemn? Consider not only things which the Yankee himself criticizes but also more subtle criticisms of American practices and values based on what the Yankee himself represents and is.

To what degree do these criticisms still hold true today?

> Do you think that these traits are universal in mankind, that the "power of training" cannot change them and consequently improve mankind?
>
> Write a well-organized essay discussing these questions and giving examples from the book to illustrate the points you make.

The following essay assignment on *An American Tragedy* is based on material in the "Afterword" by Irving Howe:

> Dreiser sees the institutions of American society (e.g., class structure based on wealth, business and industry, politics, "law and order," and religion) as the all-powerful agents which determine and define the limitations beyond which characters dare not go without (probably) destroying themselves by deviating from norms. These social institutions thus produce "the endlessly repeated sequence of desire, effort, and disintegration. . . . So well defined is the sphere of social activity that he who departs from it is doomed."
>
> Choose three characters from *An American Tragedy* who, vaguely and restlessly dissatisfied, aspire; who struggle to enlarge their social limits; and who suffer disintegration or perhaps destruction. (I add orally, "You have a degree of choice, but there is one character you must choose.")
>
> In a well-organized essay (introduction, paragraph on each character, conclusion), indicate for each character (1) the nature of the DISSATISFACTION and ASPIRATION (i.e., both negative and positive aspects), (2) the specific MEANS used in the struggle, and (3) the ultimate FATE of the social deviant.

While the class reads *An American Tragedy*, we talk about the cause-effect relationships among fate, coincidence, heredity, environment, character, choice, and situation. We also talk about the various components of the environment: social structure, economic factors, the role of religion, political considerations (including the legal system), and education. I remind them of the notes they took on these relationships and factors before I give them this make-up essay:

> In a well-organized essay, discuss any three "victims" from *An American Tragedy*. For each, (1) tell at least five outside (i.e., out of individual control) forces acting on the victim; (2) give specific examples of each force at work in the victim's life; and (3) rank the influence of these five forces (from greatest to least) on the life of the victim. (4) Does free choice play any role in the ultimate fate of the victim?
>
> Given this information, what is the most important factor in the "disintegration" and/or "destruction" of these victims? (i.e., What one factor, if changed, would most radically alter the fate of these victims?)

While students are reading Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, they make a chart based on this grid: Across the top — beginning, anticipated development, actual development, end, possible good; down the side (items showing growth or change) — Rose of Sharon's baby, the literal grapes of California, the metaphorical grapes of wrath, and the efforts at unified action. Students know that their final essay on the book will be open note (i.e., whatever they put on their charts), so most do a good job of filling in information which might prove useful. The chart also prompts them to ask better questions during class discussion since they are actively looking for relevant items as they read.

> In a well-organized essay, compare Rose of Sharon's baby with the literal grapes of California, the metaphorical grapes of wrath, and all the efforts at unified action. How does each begin; what development is anticipated for each; how does each actually develop; how does each end? What, if any, good or hope is possible from the apparent defeat of each of these four? Remember, Steinbeck asserts that "Having stepped forward, [Man] may slip back, but . . . never the full step back."

The make-up version for this novel concentrates on the characters and gives less emphasis to theme:

> Several characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* change their attitudes and values between the opening and close of the book. In a well-organized essay, discuss those changes in three characters. Give specific evidence to show each character's initial attitudes and values, to show changes during the story, and to indicate final attitudes and values.
>
> Is there a pattern to these changes? If so, what is it?
>
> Do you agree with the soundness of the final values these characters hold? Defend your answer.

The final book students read is Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. When the course is taught first semester, the novelette fits in nicely between the Christmas break and the end of the semester and is a pleasant change of pace after two long books. In addition to the final essay, students have had quizzes every four to six days on the other books. With this book, however, there is only the essay test. Consequently, I have a number of topics from which to choose. These topics are based on the group's choice ("Do you want an essay on the relationship between the old man and the fish, the old man as a Christ figure, the old man's values, or the old man's endurance?"), my estimation of the group's ability, or the area where class discussion has been particularly fruitful. First:

> Analyze the relationship between the old man and the fish. Consider the relationship chronologically: (1) from when the old man leaves the harbor until he first sees the fish; (2) from the

first sighting until the old man ties the fish to the boat; and (3) from then until the end of the book. Be sure to include both an introductory and a concluding paragraph.

Another option:

Consider the old man (alone or in conjunction with the fish) as a Christ figure. In a well-organized essay, cite as much specific evidence as possible from the book to support this idea.

A third possibility:

What values does the old man hold? Choose at least three qualities which govern the old man's actions (i.e., values which he holds and follows); and, in a well-organized essay, show these values at work in his life. Give specific examples.

What is the source of these values? Are they self-imposed, or have they been adopted from the economic, religious, social, and/or political beliefs of his society?

What do these values prove to himself and to others?

Finally:

In a well-organized essay, relate the main events of the old man's three day ordeal and his suffering and endurance during that time.

What does his endurance "prove" to himself? to others? (How do you explain the reaction of the uncomprehending tourists and the disposal actions of his fellow fishermen?)

Can this entire experience be related to his wife's missing picture and to his dreams of lions in Africa? Explain.

Is the old man undefeated at the end? Explain.

The semester exam is also an essay examination, and the topics I have used would be appropriate for virtually any novel course. Again, these are things which we have talked about during the semester, but these topics also require individual synthesis and insight. Here they are:

In a well-organized essay, discuss the appropriateness of the four titles. Why do you think each author chose each particular title? How does each reflect the content (the events and/or the philosophy) of its book? Which title(s), if any, would you change? To what? Why?

Another choice:

"Things are seldom what they seem." Many works of literature explore the difference between illusion (what seems to be) and reality (what actually is). In a well-organized essay, cite examples of this theme in all four novels read this semester, and show how the difference between illusion and reality is important in these books.

Do these examples carry a common message? If so, what is it?

And finally:

> Compare and contrast (A.1) Hank Morgan and Clyde Griffiths, and (A.2) Jim Casy and Santiago; OR (B.1) Roberta and Rose of Sharon, and (B.2) Hank Morgan and Santiago. Be sure to note both similarities and differences. Remember to provide an introduction and a conclusion for each essay. [If students have read Hawthorne rather than Twain, I use Arthur Dimmesdale rather than Hank in (A.1) and Hester Prynne rather than Hankin in (B.2).]

"The American Novel" has been a joy to teach, and part of that pleasure has come from the insights students gain as they learn to note telling details and make supportable inferences. If we truly do not know what we think until we write it, then writing about literature gives students the opportunity they need in order to acquire that self-knowledge.

Thanks, Clarence.

Three Writing Assignments for *A Farewell to Arms*

Kay Jacob
Romeoville High School

Eleventh-grade students usually enjoy reading *A Farewell to Arms*. Ernest Hemingway, in this highly autobiographical novel, successfully combines a memorable love story with a realistic account of World War I. Students also usually enjoy writing about the novel's two main characters and the concepts that they represent and express. When my students study *A Farewell to Arms*, I usually rely on three writing assignments: the first requires research on the life of Ernest Hemingway, and the last two require an examination of social and religious or moral values expressed in the novel.

I usually begin our study of *A Farewell to Arms* by making use of Carlos Baker's filmstrip/record account of the life and works of Ernest Hemingway. Then I assign Book I of *A Farewell to Arms*, which introduces the reader to the major characters and problems of the novel and ends with Frederick Henry's being wounded and sent back to the hospital in Milan.

After viewing the filmstrip and reading Book I, students are usually sufficiently engrossed in the book and its author to be receptive to their first writing assignment, one which requires research. Research topics are written on 3 x 5 file cards and stored in a recipe file box with alphabetical dividers. I found it wise to start with about twice as many topics or subjects as the number of students in my largest class. (Later my students and I thought of many more topics to add to our collection.) Typical topics for research related to *A Farewell to Arms* include the name of the Red Cross nurse who served as a model for Catherine Barkley, the war in Italy in 1917, the poem "A Farewell to Arms" by George Peele, the birth of Hemingway's son Patrick by caesarean section, the Hemingway short story "Indian Camp," and the suicide of Hemingway's father. I ask students to choose at least one topic for research. Although I try to have biographies, books of criticism, and other works by Hemingway available in the classroom and school library, students may sometimes make use of sources as general as encyclopedias in completing their assignment. I ask students to write a paragraph explaining the significance of their topic to the life and works of Hemingway, and particularly to *A Farewell to Arms*. Each class period several students are asked to share their research paragraphs with the class. When the reports are finished, the written papers are stored in a three-ring binder, which becomes a class resource book on Hemingway as a man and as an author.

I usually make my second writing assignment after students have completed Book II of the novel, the one which deals with Lieutenant Henry's convalescence in Milan and his love affair with the English nurse, Catherine Barkley. When I first began making this assignment, I was mainly concerned with the role of women in the stories and novels of Ernest Hemingway. Typical composition assignments would thus be based on such questions as "Is Catherine Barkley a round or flat character?" and "Is Catherine Barkley a liberated woman?" and "Does Ernest Hemingway understand women?" In response, girls would frequently quote passages like the following in which Catherine expresses her love for Lt. Henry:

> I want what you want. There isn't any me any more. Just what you want. (p. 106, Scribner's edition, 1929.)
>
> You are happy, aren't you? Is there anything I do you don't like? Can I do anything to please you? (p. 116)

Girls might also note Catherine's unconventionality and independence, but they would almost always conclude that she had "a

long way to go" to reach liberation. Frederick Henry and Ernest Hemingway were, in turn, usually condemned by the girls in the class as male chauvinists. Boys in my classes were usually not enthusiastic, and sometimes even hostile, to my "role of women" assignment. Thus I sometimes had to provide a substitute topic for them, perhaps one dealing with the Retreat from Caporetto.

As my students and I continued to read and share biographical accounts of Ernest Hemingway and criticisms of his works, we began to see that the subject of male liberation is as important to understanding Hemingway as that of female liberation. Particularly after reading from A. E. Hotchner's account of Hemingway's last years in *Papa Hemingway,* we began to realize that being a Hemingway hero was not easy for either Frederick Henry or Ernest Hemingway. Students began to relate the role played by Hemingway heroes to the injuries and accidents suffered by Hemingway himself and to his eventual physical and emotional collapse and suicide.

More recently I have expanded my writing to include both the roles of men and women, as exemplified in the characterization of Frederick Henry and Catherine Barkley. As a result, the "role" papers are now less slanted toward accounts of male oppression and female submission. Students, and particularly those who have resorted to *Cliffs Notes,* are beginning to see both Catherine and Frederick as "code heroes." Although Catherine remains an essentially static character, she is now more frequently described in student papers as being noble, stoic, and brave. And, even though Frederick Henry remains essentially "a man's man," he is also portrayed by students as being capable of showing great sensitivity, devotion, and gentleness. The "role" composition is still less popular with the boys in my class than with the girls, but the assignment has proven to be thought provoking for all students and always gives rise to much discussion at all stages of the writing process.

My third writing assignment for *A Farewell to Arms* is concerned with religion — or perhaps more safely and correctly stated, with moral values. To foster pre-writing discussion on religious and moral values, we usually examine several passages from the text. Near the end of the novel when Catherine's condition becomes critical, she says,

> I'm not brave any more, darling. I'm all broken. They've broken me. I know it now.... They just keep it up till they break you. (p. 323)

A bit later, Lt. Henry thinks,

> Now Catherine would die. That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you.... they killed you in the end. You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you. (p. 327)

Class discussion then focuses on identifying the *they* that both Catherine and Lt. Henry mention. We also theorize on who or what it is that eventually *breaks* or *kills* a person. In the class discussion and later in their compositions, students have an opportunity to agree or disagree with the sentiments that Catherine and Lt. Henry seem to be expressing. Although students are given some latitude in shaping their thesis statement for this composition, they usually answer some form of the question, "In the end, are Catherine and Lt. Henry punished for immorality?" Answers are generally thoughtful and complex. In their compositions, students frequently affirm traditional religious beliefs, and sometimes deny them.

Recently a good deal of attention has been given to developing thinking skills through composition. I believe my writing assignments for *A Farewell to Arms* do take my students through a hierarchy of levels of thinking. The research assignment requires only rather simple reporting of biographical and historical information. However, this first assignment, along with the reading of the novel itself, forms a research base on which the characterization, the comparison and contrast, and judgments of the next two assignments are built. If reference is made to B. S. Bloom's "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives," in his 1956 handbook, it can be observed that in completing their three writing assignments, students move from the relatively low-level skills of knowledge and comprehension to the higher levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is a very thought provoking book. Teachers, by helping students to become better writers about literature, enable them to become better thinkers as well — and vice versa. As E. M. Forster observed, "I don't know what I think until I see what I've said."

A Knight to Remember: Or, It Wasn't Easy Seeing Green

GEORGE B. SHEA, JR.
BELLEVILLE WEST HIGH SCHOOL

Professional writers are continually in search of an audience. Student writers have one, their teacher. But writing every paper for the teacher is rather like performing a play only for the critics: too many evaluations and not enough responses, too many "Boo's" and not enough "Bravo's." Student writers must learn to make the same decisions about their writing that the professional writer makes: What is my purpose? Who is the audience I want to address? What is an appropriate form, point of view, and tone for that audience? But how can students ever learn to make these decisions if they are always writing for the teacher? They can't.

That realization has disturbed me so much that I quit making all the decisions and let my students make some choices on their own. I had been telling them that writing changes when the audience changes, but I hadn't let them experience those changes because they were always writing for the same audience, me.

This assignment on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in my English literature class was a first step. I designed it in such a way that the purpose was the same for everyone. Then, I gave the students four choices of audience to see if they could write appropriately for the audience they chose. Since I was going to be one of the evaluators of these papers, the "critic" was still in the audience, but he was much less threatening while sitting in the middle of others who had come to enjoy and to learn. The success of that assignment has led me to use it over and over again. Both the students and I are pleased to have many more "Bravo's" as a result of this process.

After all, who wouldn't want to learn to face fear courageously? And who wouldn't enjoy learning this through the efforts of the Green Knight? — a kind of a cross between the Incredible Hulk and the Jolly Green Giant, as my students see him. Since Sir Gawain learns an important lesson from the Green Knight and profits from facing his fears courageously, we use that idea as a theme from which we develop a statement of purpose: persuade your audience that facing fear courageously is important to his or her well-being. We could focus on other themes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* I suppose, but we have to decide on just

one since I want everyone's purpose to be the same. Only then can the students see how a change in audience creates other changes in the writing (form, point of view, tone, vocabulary). Besides, all students like scary stories, and they all have one to tell about themselves. Yes, even these brave juniors and seniors have experienced fear.

The prewriting exercises give the students an opportunity to tell their stories. "Recall a time when you were afraid," I tell them. "Tell us in this class the story, making sure that we really experience what that fear was." After we all write our stories and share them with others, I ask some follow-up questions: "How did you react to the fear? Were you proud of the way you acted or not? If you had it to do over again, would you do the same thing? How did you feel about the way you acted? How did others feel about it?" These questions are preliminary ones that I use as we are reading and discussing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* The students try to identify with the fear of Sir Gawain.

After reading *Sir Gawain,* discussing the story, and writing their own experiences, the students receive this assignment.

Paper on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The purpose of this paper is to persuade your audience that facing fear courageously is important to his/her well-being.

Your choices of audience are these:

1. **Mr. Shea**
   - A. Write a formal (that means third person), five-paragraph literary essay.
   - B. Give three examples to support your thesis statement that facing fear courageously is important.
   - C. All three examples should come from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*
   - D. The introduction should name the literary work and should end with your thesis statement.
   - E. Each of the three middle paragraphs should state and develop one of your examples.
   - F. The conclusion should begin with a variation of your thesis statement and move back to a general statement.
2. **Another Medieval Knight**
   - A. Write an informal (that means you may use first and second person pronouns) letter or essay using the persona of Sir Gawain.

B. Your first paragraph should introduce your thesis statement that facing fear courageously is important.
C. Give three examples to support your thesis statement.
D. The paper may have as many paragraphs as you feel are necessary.
E. All three examples should come from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* Remember — these events happened to you.

3. **An Eight-Year-Old Boy or Girl** (The child could be a little younger or older.)
   A. Write an informal (that means you may use first and second person pronouns) essay that an eight-year-old would understand.
   B. Your first paragraph should introduce your thesis statement that facing fear courageously is important.
   C. Give three examples to support your thesis statement.
   D. The paper may have as many paragraphs as you feel are necessary.
   E. One example should be something from the child's own experience. (Make this up if you do not know a specific child to whom you can write.)
   F. One example should be something from your own experience.
   G. One example should be from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Example: Let me tell you about a story I read).

4. **A Specific Classmate**
   A. Write an informal (that means you may use first and second person pronouns) essay for your classmate. You may decide whether this student has read *Sir Gawain* or not.
   B. Your first paragraph should introduce your thesis statement that facing fear courageously is important.
   C. Give three examples to support your thesis statement.
   D. The paper may have as many paragraphs as you feel are necessary.
   E. One example should be from your own experience.
   F. One example should be from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*
   G. The other example may be from any source. You may even give a second personal example or a second example from *Sir Gawain.*

This is how you will be evaluated:

The writing is appropriate for the intended audience.	2 4 6 8 10	_____
The tone and point of view are consistent.	2 4 6 8 10	_____
You give three examples.	2 4 6	_____
The examples are well developed.	2 4 6	_____
The thesis statement appears in the first paragraph.	2 4	_____
The sentence structure is appropriate for the audience and purpose.	2 4	_____
The punctuation and spelling are accurate.	2 4 6 8 10	_____
	Total	_____

GRADING SCALE

45-50 = A 40-44 = B 35-39 = C 30-34 = D 0-29 = F

As the students work through their revisions, they work in groups of four. The first time they meet, they exchange comments with students who are writing for the same audience. After that revision, they meet with students who are writing for other audiences. In these sessions they discuss the appropriateness of the language and the examples they use for their audience. After these revisions, those students who are writing for another student or for a young child must show their writing to that audience and try to bring a response of some kind back to me. In evaluating the paper, I take into consideration the reactions the student received from those audiences.

Approaching the assignment in this way makes the students identify with the literature through the prewriting done in their journals. It makes them understand and appreciate the importance of writing to accomplish a specific purpose for a specific audience. It allows them not only to have some choice but also to be imaginative and creative in writing the assignment. It gives them a chance to be evaluated according to criteria that they know and understand, and it gives them a chance to share their writing with a more appreciative audience, someone who reads the paper to enjoy and to learn. In short, it allows them to exercise some of the choices that real writers make. Who knows, they might even convince an eight-year-old brother or sister to listen to a story about the Green Knight instead of watching a rerun of the Incredible Hulk. That would be one giant step for the humanities indeed.

Beowulf and the Literary Question

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It is too often the case that when Beowulf's barrow is built above him and the Geatish nation laments his demise and their end, the student murmurs deprecatingly and closes the book. The death of one of the noblest heroes in the English literary tradition is hardly moving or exciting or memorable, for the world and culture of *Beowulf* is, to most students, as remote as the last ice age. The definitions of honor, reputation, and pride that Beowulf embraces seem oddly unrealistic when seen in the glaring neon of the twentieth century, and while they may be compelling for him, they remain foreign to most students.

Certainly the Old English period is not the most accessible of times. It was itself an age of paradox, when Christianity seeped into the corners of a world dominated by the northern sense of pride, loyalty, and individual accomplishment. Even as Hrothgar warns the young Beowulf against the excesses of pride, the reader has already learned that the hero desires a good reputation above all things. He wants to be remembered as a hero. And it is perhaps fitting that the most significant archeological find from this period — the funeral boat at Suton Hoo — should carry both ornamented trappings of war and a scop's harp. The deed and the recounting of the deed are, for Beowulf and the Old English culture, all of a piece.

For most students, however, the story itself is rather odd. Characters' motivation seems almost inscrutable. Why should Beowulf travel to fight a deadly foe that menaces another country? Why should Unferth lend his sword to someone who has accused him of murder? Why should Hrothgar reply with gratitude, then sermonizing? Why should Beowulf, as an old man, insist on fighting the dragon alone? And why should his death bring about the death of his nation?

Questions like these come out of an unfamiliarity with the culture from which *Beowulf* springs. Most teachers who have worked with medieval texts have had to confront such unfamiliarity. While there are a number of ways to deal with this, two which seem tempting in actuality distort the meaning of the poem. The first is to teach the poem as a twentieth century work, much as if the Miller's Tale is reduced to a dirty story, or the Wife of Bath's

Tale becomes only the tale of a feminist frustrated by her social environment. The characters of *Beowulf*, if examined in this manner, are simply silly and without motive.

The second danger is to teach it as mere fantasy. While the last twenty years have seen an increase in interest in works of fantasy, the popularity of that genre has done what popularity has done to many genres: characters and plots fit into stereotyped molds too easily. The characters of *Beowulf* are without exception larger than the character molds of the fantasy genre.

Still, examining *Beowulf* as a work of northern fantasy does work as a pre-writing technique. Students are familiar with tales of a hero fighting against apparently insuperable odds in the form of an unnatural monster. Pre-writing discussions approaching the poem this way could begin with the expectations readers have when they come to a work of fantasy. The warrior-hero, the king, the coward, and the monster all might be expected to act in given ways. But that is only a beginning, for the characters in *Beowulf* quickly move beyond the stereotyped forms.

A significant part of a composition assignment should work at increasing the student's accessibility to the poem, as well as encouraging critical analysis. One approach is to use two essay assignments. The first, given midway through the period in which the class is discussing the poem, should be short — about three pages — and designed to make the poem less remote. The second, longer essay, given at the end of the class' examination, should emphasize critical examination of *Beowulf* as an artistic poem.

Short Paper Assignments

The options for the short paper should stem from pre-writing discussion.

Option One: Heroes and Monsters

1. Beowulf has long been recognized as a literary hero, but it is difficult to define precisely what "hero" means. How, for example, is a hero different from a celebrity? Was John Wayne a hero or a celebrity? Discuss the ways in which *Beowulf* pictures its protagonist as a hero. Does the work give any clues to how it defines such a term? If it does how do those definitions apply to the protagonist?
2. The three monsters in Beowulf are all pictured as enemies of God and mankind, but the poem does not simply dismiss them at that. What additional roles do they play? Do they serve as correctives in any sense? Do they help to elucidate other

characters? Or do they simply appear as evil creatures to provide a quest for Beowulf and his companions?

Both of these questions ask students to read the poem as something more than fantasy. They come at it instead from the point of view of the poet and the culture he seeks to evoke, a culture which is not his own. Each question moves from the inside of the poem outward, as students seek to understand the poet's definition of the hero or his vision of the role of the monsters.

Option Two: Character Motivation

This option comes out of the pre-writing discussion of fantasy, but it moves beyond it very quickly. It focuses on the complexity of character, for no character in *Beowulf* is less than complex, and suggests that motivation for all the characters is cloudy at times and never simple.

Choose one of the characters below and discuss the motivation for their actions. Read over what they say about themselves, what other characters say about them, and, perhaps most important, what the poet says about them. How are their motivations determined, and how do these motivations affect their actions?

Beowulf	Grendel
Hrothgar	Grendel's dam
Unferth	Dragon

Each of these characters has a somewhat mixed motivation. Beowulf is, of course, the most complex, and it would be best to limit students to one of the three monstrous fights. The constant interplay between pride, concern for reputation, and honor establishes a motivation which is highly heroic, yet also at times questionable. Hrothgar stands in a potentially dishonorable situation, since he must bear the repeated attacks of Grendel with no ability to take vengeance himself. He must rely on the prowess of a foreigner to rid his kingdom of an evil as he sleeps apart from the rest of his retainers. Beowulf accuses Unferth of murdering his brother, yet Unferth will later lend Beowulf Hrunting, his sword, which is an acknowledgement of his weakness in the face of Grendel's attacks as well as an attempt to participate vicariously in Beowulf's quest. Grendel's motive seems to be sheer hatred, though the poet gives hints about the causes for that malice. The other two monsters have more concrete reasons for their rampages: Grendel's mother seeks revenge for the death of her son; the dragon seeks revenge for the theft of his cup.

This option encourages a careful reading of the text and a recognition that characters in this work are not the simple stereotypes of contemporary fantasy. Grendel's mother is, in a sense, justified in her attack, just as Beowulf is justified in his. Unferth and Hrothgar clearly have thought deeply about the implications of their actions. The poet refuses to allow any of the characters to be put into simple categories.

Longer Paper Assignment

The second, longer paper should be more critical; it presupposes a close reading of the poem. One option for this question is an examination of theme; the other is an examination of structure. One of the major critical questions on *Beowulf* deals with the nature of the poem's unity, and critics have generally agreed that both the themes and structure of the poem bind its parts together. For the purposes of this longer paper, however, they might be examined separately.

A number of critics have shown that the themes of *Beowulf* are as intricately interwoven as the designs in Celtic artwork. Students could extract one of the strands from that design and examine its implication within the poem.

Option One: On Theme

Choose one of the following themes in *Beowulf* and examine it within the context of the poem. How does it influence motivations, actions, and even the comments of the narrator? Does it contribute to the unity of the poem, or stand apart from it?

— the theme of vengeance
— the theme of loyalty
— the theme of reputation

If you wish, you may examine another theme which you find to be significant.

Some of these themes necessarily overlap, but students will already be aware of their presence and role in the poem from the short paper. Each of the three listed themes is of particular importance for the meaning of *Beowulf*, and each works towards the final death lament at Beowulf's barrow.

The theme of vengeance is intriguing because of its applicability to kings — Hrothgar and Beowulf — as well as to monsters — Grendel's dam and the dragon. The theme of loyalty is used early on to indicate the nobility of Beowulf's character, but then it is used late in the poem to express disapproval of the thanes

Beowulf has surrounded himself with. The theme of reputation begins and ends the poem, as two dead heroes are mourned and — more importantly — remembered.

Option Two: On Structure

This is the most difficult of the assignments, and students who turn to criticism will find a plethora of options. A short list of possibilities serves to focus paper topics.

Examine the overall structure of *Beowulf* to see how the poet has organized his material into an artistic whole. Then choose one of the following ways of looking at the poem's structure and argue whether or not it is a valid understanding of the way the poem is organized.

- The three episodes of the monstrous battles divide the poem into three roughly equal parts.
- The poem is divided in half and examines the life of its protagonist. The first half examines the young, adventurous Beowulf, the second the old, kingly Beowulf.
- The poem is divided in half and examines the role of the king. The first half deals with Hrothgar, the second with Beowulf.

Since the criticism of J. R. R. Tolkien, the first choice has been the most popular description of the poem's organization. Each episode deals with a separate monster, and each is relatively equal in length. Cultural evidence also supports this division. Since the poem was recited orally, it could be conveniently broken down into three parts for three sittings. The second battle depends to some extent on the first, which might account for the recapitulation of the battle with Grendel at the beginning of the second battle, since the scop would need to remind his listeners and any newcomers of the events of the previous night's recitation. The third battle can stand alone.

The other choices approach the structure thematically. The first examines what might be interpreted as a weak, ineffective king — although the poet denies this, claiming that no dishonor came to Hrothgar — as opposed to a strong king who battles for his country. The poet does not claim that Beowulf was a better king than Hrothgar, however, especially since Beowulf's death leaves his nation open to attack. The other choice pits youth against age, a conflict with a very long tradition.

Taken together, the two papers make *Beowulf* more accessible to students and increase their awareness of the role of the poet,

both in terms of his character development and his thematic and structural complexity. In addition, they call for the close reading of the poem as an artistic whole, with an emphasis on the artistry of the work. The ultimate goal is an appreciation of that artistry and an understanding of a work that is culturally remote yet imaginatively imminent.

Cather, Chopin, and Frost: Discovering What to Make of a Diminished Thing

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Among the most difficult periods in people's lives are those during which they must adjust to the discovery that the world is in some way different from what they had expected. The shock which results from the confrontation between expectation and reality can be traumatic — indeed, can be fatal, if the person is unable to adjust to a world which has no place for or patience with stubborn misapprehension and unrealistic demands.

The conflict between what one expects and what one finds is a universal experience. Because of that fact, literary treatments of the theme are often very well received by both high school and college students. Students are sympathetic with the indecisions and agonies of characters who must adapt themselves to a world which does not resemble the one which they had expected, or the one which they wanted. Such characters are, after all, faced with having to alter their most fundamental beliefs and attitudes — their very view of the world.

One of the most successful writing assignments I have ever used is one which focuses on this particular conflict by focusing on two characters who must work their ways through it. Students read two short novels and three poems, and discuss the characters' capacities (or inabilities) to make the adjustments required when they discover that what they want from life is not in line with life as it really and unavoidably is. The novels are *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin (W. W. Norton Edition, 1976) and *The Professor's House* by Willa Cather (Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); the poems, which focus students' attention on this particular aspect of the

novels, are "The Oven Bird," "Hyla Brook," and "A Boundless Moment," all in *The Collected Poems* of Robert Frost (Holt, 1963). Together, these five brief works offer dozens of possible assignments. I'd like to explain the assignment which I've found most useful. I can almost guarantee success.

Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening*, to be unforgivably oversimple, is the story of a twenty-seven-year-old wife and mother who gradually "awakens" to the realization that her comfortable domestic existence is not truly satisfying to her. Despite financial security, good social standing, a generally kindly husband, and healthy children, Edna Pontellier cannot feel satisfied with or by her life. Almost without knowing what she is doing or why she is doing it, she considers and discards several possible sources of satisfaction: art, religion, sexuality, motherhood, society, and wifehood. Left at the end with little more certainty about why she is dissatisfied and what she wants than "I don't want anything but my own way" (p. 110), she walks into the Gulf of Mexico and drowns. Some readers regard her death as a triumphant affirmation of independence through her refusal to submerge her essential self, while others argue that her suicide is a weak, pointless, and foolish expression of an infantile refusal to grow up and accept reality. That dispute will inevitably lie at the center of class discussions of the book, but there is much else worthy of discussion, including some carefully structured and carried-through symbolism and an admirable pattern of Edna's repeatedly seeing her life in light of her childhood.

Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) gives us Professor Godfrey St. Peter at fifty-two, a dedicated teacher and historian whose post-World War I world seems to him unbearably sterile, shallow, and unsatisfactory. His daughters married and moved, his uncomfortable but homey old house abandoned for a handsome but soulless new one, and the one truly first-rate mind of his experience, young Tom Outland, killed in the war, St Peter is compelled to confront the question of whether a sensitive and thoughtful human being should compromise his ideals in order to fit into the mainstream of a society which does *not* live "for something more than food and shelter" (p. 219). With his family traveling in Europe, St. Peter spends a summer alone with Tom Outland's diary. Increasingly persuaded that his life (and his culture) has no further meaning and is not worth living, he drifts passively towards a sort of non-volitional suicide. Unlike Edna Pontellier, however, he makes one minute but crucial attempt to save himself, and thereby earns continued life, courtesy of Augusta,

the sewing lady, who represents "the bloomless side of life" (p. 280) to St. Peter.

Apart from the splendid ways that these books illuminate each other and are illuminated by the poems, let me say in passing that one great part of the pleasure of teaching them comes very simply from the fact that they are almost inevitably popular with the students. Even kids who don't think of themselves as liking to read almost always find themselves wrapped up in and wholly sympathetic with the characters of Edna and the professor. Too, both books are (despite my dark summaries) implicitly affirmations of life and vitality.

I do the books considerable injustice by summing them so badly and sparsely; they are remarkably complex and well-crafted works of art. Nor are they open only to the kind of interpretation which is assumed by my summaries. In fact, that quality of offering several entirely defensible readings is one of the books' most valuable characteristics.

Regardless of how students choose to judge the professor and Edna, the assignment allows them the opportunity to advance carefully reasoned arguments in defense of their positions. The basic assignment is quite simple: write an essay which discusses Professor St. Peter and Edna Pontellier in connection with one, two, or three of the poems by Frost. The position which each paper takes and the direction by which it arrives at that position are matters which are up to the student — and I regard that kind of ordered-but-flexible, free-but-restrained topic as most valuable, both for the students who have to discover their own thoughts about the books, and for the teacher who is freed from the necessity of reading the same paper written thirty different times.

Godfrey St. Peter and Edna Potellier are ideal subjects for comparison and contrast. Each of them appears to be secure, comfortable, and happy, the fortunate recipient of the best things which life has to offer. Yet each of them finds himself so deeply and fundamentally out of place in the orderly and conventional external world as to find death preferable. Both strip themselves a step at a time of the garments of their social roles, coming more and more closely to the essential, the basic people over whom those layers of roles and public identities had been laid. On arriving at the original, the "naked" fundamental self, Edna and Godfrey must decide whether it is worth it to make the compromises which would allow them to continue to function. In Edna's case, compromise would be a matter of forever submerging the "private self" which she has kept hidden and inviolate all her life,

and in whose fantasies she has always lost herself; in Godfrey's case compromise will be a matter of accepting "the bloomless side of life" and reconciling himself to living in houses which reflect public rather than individual values and virtues.

The books alone offer plenty of scope for discussions of the central characters' similarities and differences, but the poems are a valuable adjunct to such discussions, serving to fix student attention on some of the issues which lie at the heart of the books. "The Oven Bird" is Frost's poem about the bird which sings (unmusically, it is true) in the heat of midsummer, when other birds are silent. Frost contrasts the hot, droopy, and worn-out summer with the freshness and promise of spring, admitting that summer is to spring as "one is to ten" — but reminding us that it can't always be spring and that no sane, wise, or mature person can expect eternal spring (or eternal youth or eternal freshness or . . .). The oven bird's song is not the musical lilt of spring — but its song is appropriate to the less-fresh world of summer. The bird has learned "what to make of a diminished thing" — and of course "what to make of a diminished thing" is what every human being must discover or decide at some point in life. It's certainly the problem confronting Edna and Godfrey.

A more poignant and equally pertinent poem is "Hyla Brook." The poet acknowledges that "By June our brook's run out of song and speed" and that the dried-leaf stream bed bears little resemblance to the lovely clear brooks "taken otherwhere in song" — customarily celebrated in poems about conventional natural loveliness. Nevertheless, it *is* our brook, and its emotional meaning to us is not dependent on its meeting some postcard or calendar ideal of picturesqueness. The poem's last line — "We love the things we love for what they are" — (or, one might say, regardless of what they are, or in spite of what they are) — is a real killer in class; I've seen it bring literal tears to students' eyes. The poem's application to the novels is again very useful, since it, like "The Oven Bird," emphasizes the vital importance of coming to terms with the way things really are, regardless of how earnestly one might want them to be otherwise. Both Edna Pontellier and Professor Godfrey St. Peter would like for it always to be spring and for the (metaphorical) brooks of their lives to be postcard-lovely . . . but both discover that life does not offer such perfection, and both must come to terms with that discovery. They are, finally, confronted by the same necessity as the speaker in "A Boundless Moment" who briefly deceives himself and his friend with the pretense that the little glimmer of color off in the starkness of the

March woods is "the paradise-in-bloom," a beautiful flower which blooms in the warmth of May. It is important — or more than important — for the speaker, like Edna and Godfrey, to "say the truth and move on" (a paraphrase); the color is not a delicate flower, but a dead leaf. Momentary indulgence in illusion and self-deception is all right — so long as you are sure to say the truth and move on, eventually.

These five works have always provided me with student papers which are remarkable for their control and focus. Because the students like the novels and the characters, feel comfortable with the poems, and find the themes understandable and pertinent, things fall together. The result is almost always a triumph of interested involvement by the students, and a pleased feeling of success for me. I recommend this assignment without reservation, and do not doubt that other teachers will come to look forward to it as much as I do.

Crawling Into Another's Skin: A Writing Assignment for *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Atticus Finch teaches his daughter and son to get into another's skin and walk around in it before judging anyone. In other words he teaches his children to think, to see life from other points of view.

This is one aim of the use of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in an American classroom. Since young people like to pretend they are someone else, this aspect of youth is a natural springboard for a writing assignment that strikes at the heart of Lee's novel.

Require each student to imagine himself a character in the story and then write a letter in character to another character in the story. The letters must be dated with a return address. (Dating the letter requires careful attention to detail, to time sequence and to events in the story. The return address gives a specific place.) The teacher can either encourage students to select a character to become or can assign characters; student selection, however, is

best. One, of course, may not imagine herself as Scout because the book is her letter to the world. Some possibilities are:

1. Jem writing to Dill
2. Tom writing to Atticus
3. Mr. Underwood writing to Tom
4. Mayellen writing to Atticus (in 1940?)
5. Boo Radley writing to Jem (or Scout)
6. Judge Taylor writing to Atticus Finch
7. Helen Robinson writing to Tom
8. Calpurnia writing to Helen R (or Tom)
9. Reverend Sykes writing to Atticus (or Tom)
10. Tom writing to Mayellen
11. Aunt Alexandra writing to Judge Taylor

Many other possibilities exist. The letters must be true to character and to the events of the day.

After the teacher collects the letters, he/she can deliver one to each person in class who then must assume another character and answer the letter in character. For example, deliver the letter from Jem to Dill to a boy who becomes Dill and he then writes Jem a response from Dill's point of view.

Very quickly students will enjoy writing and learning to "crawl into another's skin." They may begin to think with their hearts, and to live imaginatively in another time and place. Many may even look back at themselves from the distance and the perspective the novel affords.

Lastly, the letters will be a joy for the teacher to read and for the student to rewrite and for both to read again.

Caroline Gordon's "A Last Day in the Field": Reading, Thinking, and Writing

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There seems to be little question that there is a high correlation between reading and writing, yet a debate is currently under way in many college composition programs over the question of whether or not reading literature is useful to students who are trying to learn to write. The opponents of combining literature

and composition make some valid points: it is entirely possible that a teacher who uses literature to teach composition may end up suffocating her students with a barrage of the technical terms of literary criticism, or she may impose on them readings beyond their capabilities or interests, or she may stifle their creativity, program their own failures, by presenting them with examples of writing they could never hope to emulate in the limited space of a semester, or she may simply forget the writing and concentrate solely on her first love — literature. What these points imply, however, is that the teacher has failed to keep writing the main focus of the class; she is teaching *about* literature, not *through* it.

Learning to write through literature allows students an opportunity to study their own feelings and desires, to test their ideas against a more sophisticated backdrop than the cliche-ridden, stereotypical world which probably constitutes the main source of their present prose. The answer to the debate over literature's place in the composition class is not that it should or should not be used, but that it should be used carefully, for specific purposes in relation to writing. With each piece of reading must come at least one piece of writing. If a teacher fails to see the importance of keeping composition as the main focus of the class, then students will flounder in a sea of literary jargon and will actually acquire little knowledge of literature and none of writing.

The first task, therefore, in designing writing assignments using literature is to make certain that writing is the first priority, and the second task is to choose appropriate texts. Research shows that inexperienced writers are usually inexperienced readers as well. While it would be preferable to use the so-called standard literary works (i.e., Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer), a teacher should keep in mind that the students are beginning writing students, not English majors. The ideal text should deal with topics that are familiar to most students, such as parent/child or male/female relationships. The goal is to find readings not too long and complicated, but at the same time, thought provoking enough to stimulate student discussion and encourage a direct attempt at prewriting. Any texts that are beyond the average student's capabilities or interests or that frustrate a student's comprehension with complex thematic or syntactical elements should be dismissed.

If selected with care, the short story can prove to be ideal. Its length is manageable, and the variety of situations, ideas, problems, and mysteries covered within this genre gives any teacher the opportunity to "tailor-fit" assignments which can generate unlimited possibilities for essays.

An illustration of an effective use of the short story in a composition class is the following assignment. As homework, students are asked to read Caroline Gordon's "A Last Day in the Field" and fill out a response page before coming to class. (For an example of response questions to Gordon's story, see Appendix A.) The response page contains very general, open-ended questions about the text and the student's response to it; ideally students should fill out these responses while they read the story or immediately after finishing it. The goal is to stimulate general reactions to the reading material and to get students writing as soon as possible. Then, in class, these responses can be discussed, argued, and expanded, either by the class as a whole or in peer-groups, thereby creating a larger frame of reference from which students can write their essays. An hour of class time should prove adequate for this task.

Once the discussion of response questions has been covered to everyone's satisfaction, a page of "cases" can be introduced. (For examples of case questions to Gordon's story, see Appendix B.) These provide the structure for the writing assignments (unless the students have come up with better ideas on their own) and are much more specific and detailed than the response questions. The idea is to provide an audience, a natural reason for writing, and a mode of communication for the writer. While papers are not assigned by modes (i.e., comparison/contrast, persuasion), the cases are structured so that certain styles of writing are preferable to others; hence the mode of writing comes naturally from within the assignment, rather than being artificially imposed from without.

Because it is possible, and perhaps desirable, to make cases complex, it is probably better to have students work in small peer-groups, in which the possibilities for writing can be explored in depth. Students may also feel more comfortable talking about the sometimes personal and controversial ideas that these cases may suggest in a more intimate setting. Furthermore, the ever-present danger of teaching *about* rather than *through* literature is eliminated when the teacher relinquishes center stage and lets the students discuss the literature in their own terms, at their own pace. This session should also take about an hour, and, at the end of class, students should be ready to take home the notes that they made in their peer-groups and begin a first attempt at prewriting — a first draft.

This draft will be brought to class at the next meeting, along with enough copies of it for each member of the student's peer-

group. It is advisable, at this point, to have the same members remain in each group, so that the revision process, now at hand, will work smoothly. As students become familiar with each other's essays, they will be able to spot flaws and improvements that appear as each paper progresses. As students become better readers and editors of each other's work, they will also become better readers and editors of their own.

Revision questionnaires are passed out to all students and must be filled out after each student reads his peer's essay. (For an example of revision questions, see Appendix C.) Then, each student must sign the questionnaire and return it to his/her peer-group member. The questionnaires offer a set of specific comments from which the writer can begin constructing a second draft, and the signature, since it can be checked by the instructor, insures that each student will make an honest effort in analyzing a classmate's work.

This assignment clearly stresses writing as a process. It begins with written responses to questions asked about the stories, and, with the aid of peer-groups, moves on to the recursive and interwoven rhythm of prewriting, writing, and revision. Students may not be able to turn in a large number of completed papers during a term, but they should be able to turn in at least four or five of high quality, each preceded by drafts. Probably one more draft of the paper discussed above is needed if students are to create sophisticated, highly-polished prose, but the number may vary according to the complexity of the readings and cases and according to the ability of each student.

Literature does have its place in the college composition classrooms. Writing — a natural, well-directed, non-threatening kind of writing — must always have the place of honor, and literature, used as a vehicle for the students' imaginations, as an organizer and synthesizer of their own thoughts, must rest at composition's right side. Then, in the literature class, where reading and analysis are the main concerns, writing will, likewise, take its appropriate place.

Appendix A

Response Page:

"The Last Day in the Field"

1. It is not always obvious to the reader that Aleck dies at the end of the story, but he does. He has been warned by his doctor and his wife that going out hunting is dangerous for him, because he is ill. It ends up costing him his life. Why do you think he

decided to go? Was it a stupid or a smart thing to do? Explain your answer.

2. At the beginning of the story, Joe is inexperienced and neglectful (i.e., He shoots too soon and forgets to bring straw for the dogs.), while Aleck is a mature father-figure. How does that situation change by the end of the story? Give some examples.
3. Do you know anybody that reminds you of Aleck or Joe? What, specifically, does this person have in common with the characters in Gordon's story?

(Note: These questions have nothing to do with traditional literary criticism. Students are never asked such questions as who the "protagonist" is or whether or not the story has a "tragic hero." These elements matter very little to the *writing* student, while first reactions and complicated ideas matter a great deal.)

Appendix B

Cases

1. You are Joe (or Joanna), and you have just come home from the hospital. When Aleck fell in the field, you had run to a nearby farmhouse and had telephoned for an ambulance. It was, of course, too late; Aleck died. You are very upset and are having a hard time talking about what happened to your parents and to some nosey neighbors, yet you still need to *explore your feelings*. You decide to write about this "last day in the field" in your journal. You feel compelled to *go over your memories* of Aleck, of the times the two of you spent together — what he taught you about growing up. You also need to express your feelings about Aleck's decision to go hunting when he knew he shouldn't. Keep in mind that the last day was spent with you. Why did he choose to take the risk? Are you angry at him, or sad, and confused? *Express your emotion.*
2. It has been about a month since Aleck has died. Some of the people in your town have been gossiping about Aleck, calling him stupid or careless — neglectful of other people's feelings (his wife's, for instance) or even sinful. Some equate his going hunting with committing suicide. You are outraged that Aleck's so-called friends are saying such horrible things about him. You decide to write a letter *to the editor* of your *small-town paper* telling them all what Aleck was really like — maybe you think he was brave or wise in his decision. *Explain* what he meant to you — what he taught you about living. You feel strongly about this, but *you want it to be published,* so you must

write accordingly; perhaps a more formal tone is necessary here. Grammar and clarity will, of course, be very important.

3. Maybe you do know someone like Aleck or Joe. Maybe they remind you, in different ways, of yourself. Have you ever had an experience like the one in this story? *Describe the situation. Tell who was involved and what they said.* It should be clear why this situation is important to you.
4. What about suicide? How do you feel about it? Can you use Gordon's story as an example to make your position on this subject clear? Be sure to *back up all your claims with examples.* Caution: This could involve research.

Appendix C

Revision Questions:

1. Depending on which case was chosen (or if a new topic was tried), did the person use example, detail, a certain tone or vocabulary, to fullest potential? How could any of these have been better employed?
2. Depending on which case was chosen, did the person seem to have a sense of audience? Was the person convincing to that audience?
3. If the person had to take on a persona, was that convincing? What was believable? What was not? How could this person make it more believable?
4. In general, how was the organization of the essay? Was it easy to follow? If not, specifically tell where you became lost and why. What must the person do to make the essay more clear?
5. What are the essay's most serious flaws? What are its best qualities?

Signature_____

Discovering Theme Through Writing: A Response-Oriented Approach to "The Lottery"

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The current interest in the process of writing has prompted many of us to expand our approaches in teaching composition. In

my own experience, I have shifted emphasis in students' writing about literature from testing them to developing their ability to interpret. In this essay, I describe a strategy for teaching writing that not only guides students toward interpretation of theme in a work of fiction or drama but also serves as a pre-writing activity for multi-paragraph formal composition. In successfully using this approach to composition with high school juniors and seniors, I have come to believe it can be an effective way for students at other levels to write about literature.

The approach is based on the assumption that readers' and writers' emotions, experiences, and associations influence their development of meaning.[1] Instructional activities that lead students to examine their own personal context in communication are called response-oriented. I believe that such techniques for teaching a process of interpretation help students to write perceptively.

Response-oriented strategies for writing about literature afford an alternative to the traditional emphasis on textual analysis. Anthony Petrosky argues that response-oriented instruction is needed because current methods, based primarily on textual analysis, do not enable a majority of young students to write effective interpretations. He cites the NAEP study on *Reading, Thinking, and Writing*, which shows that of the nation's seventeen-year-olds "only five to ten percent could move beyond initial comprehension to write well-developed, reasoned responses, and even the better responses were superficial. . . ."[2] Teachers, however, have not received much information about student-centered instructional methods for writing about literature.

Advocates of response-oriented teaching strategies have been strongly influenced by Louise M. Rosenblatt and David Bleich. The publications of Bleich are particularly concerned with examining the emotions, experiences, and associations reflected in a reader's written interpretation.[3] Through Bleich's influence, I developed the present strategy of writing about literature to foster a reader's personal involvement with the literary text and with other readers. As I will later explain, this activity prepares students for relating literature to their own experience.

Near the beginning of a semester, I distribute the following two questions and ask students to use them in writing at least two journals a week:

Pre-writing Assignment for Interpreting Theme

Directions: Choose question A or question B for a particular day's reading assignment, and respond to each part of the question.

Develop ideas completely and clearly, and use paragraphing as needed.

A. Describe what you consider to be an important discovery, action, or reaction of a character or speaker. Then, explain whether you agree or disagree and why. Support your view with specific information from the reading. Be alert for facts in the reading that might lead you to alter your position or even change your subject. Finally, tell what you think your analysis shows as a truth about human nature or society.

B. First, think of an important discovery, action, or reaction of a character or speaker. Then, describe a scene, including dialogue if you wish, that shows what you believe will be the most significant effect of that discovery, action, or reaction. Next, using facts only from the literary text, not your sequel, tell why you agree or disagree with the characters or speaker in that scene. Be alert for facts in the reading that might lead you to alter your sequel. Finally, tell what you think your scene shows as a truth about human nature or society.

Questions A and B enable students to exercise their attitudes and values in choosing a subject of journal writing. Thus, the questions promote personal involvement at the outset of interpretation. However, instead of turning students to study the emotions, experiences, and associations that underlie their interpretations, as Bleich's approach does, my strategy next leads students to study the literary text for evidence to support their subjective response. By rereading, students may verify or modify their position for or against a character or speaker as the basis of developing a theme.

Since question A can be answered in only ten or fifteen minutes, it may be used to involve students at the beginning of class. I find that question B usually takes more time and therefore works well as a homework assignment. Of course, the teacher could adapt either question in identifying a particular situation serving as the subject of composition. (At the end of this article, I list several examples of situations in literature which I have chosen as a basis for doing question A.) In whatever way questions A and B are used, it is important that students express and support a position for or against a character or speaker as well as discover a truth concerning human experience.

Peer reading and discussion of the journals enable students to help one another in assessing how accurately and completely they have used facts from the literature. Small-group discussion often pinpoints key problems of reading comprehension and allows students to advise one another in solving those problems or to get individual help from the teacher. This activity encourages students

to learn that various aspects of a literary work have thematic significance and that a given situation is subject to different interpretations. To illustrate my techniques further, let me explain how my students have written about "The Lottery," a short story by Shirley Jackson commonly read in the junior and senior high English curriculum.

For those who have missed "The Lottery" or who have not read it recently, here is a summary: As the story opens on a bright June day in a village of three hundred, all of the able-bodied townspeople assemble for the annual drawing. Tessie Hutchinson, a housewife and mother of three, objects when her family receives the only slip of paper marked with a black dot. Next, Tessie as well as her husband Bill and their two unmarried children must draw to determine which one gets the paper with the black dot. Laughing, the two children reveal blank papers, and Bill shows everyone that his wife's paper bears the black dot. Someone gives pebbles to her small son Davy. Then, Tessie screams in protest as the townspeople stone her to death.

In responding to question A, students have written about different aspects of "The Lottery"; for example:

1. the manner in which Tessie Hutchinson arrives at the drawing;
2. Old Man Warner's defense of the lottery;
3. Tessie's protest when her husband draws the marked paper;
4. Tessie's protest when she herself draws the marked paper;
5. Tessie's friends and neighbors' refusal to act on her complaint of unfairness;
6. Bill Hutchinson's acquiescence when his wife draws the marked paper; and
7. the possible willingness of Tessie's son to participate in the stoning.

Responses to situations such as these lay the foundation for discussion in small groups or with the class as a whole to probe relationships of character and theme.

Useful and sometimes exciting discussion derives from students' responses that are incompletely or inaccurately supported by facts in the reading and from responses with provocative ideas. After students discuss how well their journals use facts from the reading, I ask them in small groups to discuss what theme is most appropriate for the literary work as a whole. Through that discussion, I try to develop a consensus of views in a particular group. In listening to small groups trying to develop consensus, I make notes to myself on points students agree on that conflict

with established literary criticism, social custom or law, or my own beliefs. I use such conflicts as the focus of discussion with the class as a whole.

The following two journal entries express a controversial view that warrants discussion by the class as a whole. Writers of both examples condone violence for those characters who defend or tolerate the inhumanity of the annual human sacrifice. The first sample journal entry below, written in response to question B as previously described, presents a dramatic scene which the student imagines as following from the action of "The Lottery." This sequel emphasizes the appropriateness of Old Man Warner's "winning" a future lottery:

> The morning of June 27 was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely, and the grass was richly green. The people of the village were gathered in the square; Mr. Summers at front. As he read off the names, the people grew anxious. Then the call rang out, "Warner."
>
> "Eightieth year I been in the lottery," Old Man Warner said as he went through the crowd. "Eightieth time."
>
> "Zanani."
>
> After that name there was a long pause, until Mr. Summers, holding his slip of paper in the air, said, "All right, fellows." For a minute no one moved, and then all the slips of paper were opened. Suddenly, the voices began to say, "Warner, it's Old Man Warner."
>
> "No, wait," exclaimed Warner.
>
> "You know the rules, you know what has to happen," said Summers.
>
> "But it isn't fair! I've done it for eighty years. I've done it longer than anyone else."
>
> The crowd encircled him with stones in their hands.
>
> "You know, Bill! Your wife had it happen to her. She knew it wasn't fair." A stone hit Warner in the leg. He fell to the ground in pain.
>
> "Fools," he muttered.
>
> This account shows that it is human nature for many to go along with others in a morally wrong action. But, once harm threatens, the individual reacts.
>
> **Steve Madden,** Student

Similarly, a second junior student condemns Tessie Hutchinson for her hypocrisy in going along with the ritual until she herself faces death:

> Tessie Hutchinson and most of the other townspeople joke about the lottery. It is as normal to them as square dances. Tessie doesn't complain about the lottery until she is picked. Then she thinks it is unfair. She realizes how terrible the

> lottery is. I am offended by what these people do, but I think Tessie got what was coming to her.
>
> Humans tend to be insensitive towards others. They continue attitudes of their parents and elders without stopping to think enough to form their own ideas.
>
> **Sherri Buchanan,** Student

Such views as those expressing poetic justice through violence need to be discussed with the class as a whole to point out why they are controversial.

When the class as a whole discusses what theme is most appropriate for "The Lottery," the figure of Tessie Hutchinson evokes considerable debate. Some students interpret Tessie's tardy arrival and glib comments as indications of her casual participation. Other students consider these behaviors as evidence of her reluctance to attend, seeing in her an ambivalence between awareness of the ritual's cruelty and acceptance of the social demand for it. To refute this emphasis on conscience in Tessie, some students point out her eagerness for her married daughter to be included in the Hutchinson family's drawing. Most students agree that Tessie's ineffective protest betrays how conformity based on self-preservation can be stronger than nonconformity based on moral indignation. Following this discussion with the class as a whole, I provide time for journals so that students may write their interpretations of a central theme.

Additionally, questions A and B can be used for other instructional purposes. For example, the writing that students perform in responding to question A could serve as a quiz over a homework reading assignment. Such a quiz can be objectively graded on the basis of how accurately and completely students use facts from the reading to develop their views. When the quiz is "open book," students who have done the homework reading are able to select the facts they use by rereading, but the students who have not done the homework will usually be unable to finish or even begin the answer.

Journals written in response to questions A and B and to class discussions help students plan multi-paragraph formal composition. After accumulating interpretations for approximately six pieces of literature, students have an adequate resource for a four- to six-paragraph paper. Such a paper develops a theme which questions A and B lead readers to identify in more than one literary work as well as in their own experience or observation. For example, I have assigned the following outline guide to help students focus upon a theme.

Assignment for "The Lottery"

This essay will discuss a theme in "The Lottery" and one or two other literary works as well as in actual experience or observation. (As usual, an outline, revised rough draft, and a final copy will be required.)

First, identify a theme from "The Lottery," using the journals based on question A or B and class discussions. Next, search for other works of literature read this semester which also present this theme. Finally, think of an important way in which this theme is reflected in your own experience or that is observed in others. A Roman Numeral may be developed in one or two paragraphs.

I. Interest the reader in the subject and state the thesis (theme).

II. Explain how "The Lottery" shows and develops the stated theme. (Be thorough, accurate, and clear in using facts from the literature.)

III. Discuss how one or two other literary works show the stated theme. (Again, be thorough, accurate, and clear in using facts from the literature.)

IV. Discuss how the theme stated in the thesis is reflected in your own experience or that observed in others. Be specific. This part should be used to conclude the paper.

The following paper was written by a high school junior using the preceding guide. For students of this level, the paper presents an appropriate thesis and supports it cogently.

A Rule of Human Nature

In every story there is an underlying truth or truths about human nature or society. "The Lottery," a short story by Shirley Jackson, tells a truth about human nature seen in other stories and in my own observation of life. This truth of human nature is about people's willingness to enter into situations only for the good or fun that they will get and their unwillingness to pay the consequences for doing so.

Mrs. Tessie Hutchinson, in "The Lottery," is a good example of this truth of human nature. The story reveals to us that Tessie at first forgot about the lottery, but "came a-running" when she realized what she was missing. Tessie at least was willing to be involved in the lottery. The effort she made to be there confirmed that. Her enthusiasm showed when her husband's name was called to draw one of the lottery slips. Her attitude changed only when she realized that she would have to suffer being the human sacrifice. Then, and only then, did Tessie keep proclaiming the lottery to be unfair and wrong. She only wanted to be in the lottery as long as she was the one throwing the stones.

Jabez Stone, in "The Devil and Daniel Webster," is also a good example of "give me something for nothing." When Jabez was approached by the Devil with a contract that would change

his life to a more prosperous one, he jumped at the chance. He did not think of the consequences he would suffer when the contract was up, but only of the prosperity it would bring him. But as the day of the contract's expiration drew near, Jabez Stone began to panic and acquired the help of Daniel Webster to release him from his commitment. All that Mr. Stone was interested in was keeping what he had gotten from the Devil and not with risking Daniel's life or honoring his part of the bargain.

In the story, "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," the main character, Bernice, wants to be accepted by the "high society" group that her cousin Marjorie belongs to. To achieve this social success, Bernice says things that she has no intention of doing, like bobbing her hair. With her newly acquired skill in conversation, Bernice scales the ladder of "high society" and steals Marjorie's boyfriend. Marjorie then puts Bernice to the test of honoring the promise of bobbing her hair. Bernice never thought in her attempt to become a socialite that she would have to suffer any consequences for doing so.

My youngest brother has always entered into situations only for the fun that it will bring him. This was the case with his entering Cub Scouts. Jonathan would always attend the meetings on the days that they were having a party. He did this until the Cub Scout leader told him that if he wanted to attend the parties, he would have to attend the meetings as well. As a result, Jonathan dropped out of Cub Scouts. His behavior confirms that some people willingly enter into situations only for the advantage that they will bring them but hesitate to pay the consequences for doing so.

Donna Mattus, Student

The author of this sample paper succeeds in presenting a theme reflected in three stories as well as in her observation of life.

I find that students often need help in discovering a common theme. Without journals and class discussions, many students are unable to develop thematic parallels that are strong enough to base a formal paper on. Thus, engaging students in a process of interpretation encourages them to write effectively about literature.

Notes

[1] For a summary of research that supports this assumption, see Bruce T. Petersen, "Writing about Responses: A Unified Model of Reading, Interpretation, and Composition," *College English*, 44 (1982), 459-468.

[2] Maja Pank Mertz, Anthony Petrosky, and Marcia Farr, "Reevaluating English Curricula," *English Journal*, 72, No. 4 (1983), 81.

[3] David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975), pp. 96-109.

Appendix

The questions below are examples of how question A may be adapted to individual selections. These questions, requiring an argumentative response supported through literary analysis, may be used to polarize students' opinions in preparation for discussion with the class as a whole.

1. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," does the effectiveness of the minister, which largely results from his wearing of the veil, justify or not the sacrifice of his marriage?
2. In Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer," does Leggatt have primarily a good or a bad influence on the young captain?
3. In Herman Melville's "Bartleby," does the narrator do as much as could be expected for Bartleby or not?
4. In John Steinbeck's "Flight," was it right or wrong of Mama Torres to send Pepe to town?
5. In Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," Billie the oiler is the only one in the lifeboat who drowns. In view of his drowning, do you believe that Billie's life was meaningful or meaningless?
6. In Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," do you think Nick will ever go into the swamp to fish?
7. In William Faulkner's "The Bear," do you think it was wise or foolish for Ike not to take his gun in search of Old Ben?
8. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," when Bernice returns to Eau Claire, will she resume her former lifestyle and attitudes, or will she practice the ways that made her popular in the big city?

Re-Writing Bambara's "My Man Bovanne"

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One of America's most teachable fiction writers is Tony Cade Bambara. Among her works are several collections of short stories such as *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) and *The Sea Birds* (1977). She has also written well-reviewed novels, including *Salt Eaters* (1980), but it is her short fiction that I have had most success in teaching. Among her short stories, none has worked better for me

than "My Man Bovanne," especially as a story to spark much student discussion and writing.

"My Man Bovanne" is a very well-crafted, tightly written story that depends almost completely on the voice of its first person narrator — her Black dialect, vocabulary, accent, wit, timing, instinct, and common sense — for its special humor and thought-provoking impact. The narrator's name is Hazel. She is in her sixties and is the mother of several grown children. The setting is New York in the late sixties or early seventies at a benefit for a Black Power political candidate. Several of Hazel's children are there as is Bovanne, who is blind. Hazel, feeling that both Bovanne and she have been brought there only out of a kind of tokenism and are being ignored, asks him to dance. They dance close because of blind Bovanne's need to feel, much too close her children think. They pull her into the kitchen and confront her, telling her she should be ashamed and instead of dancing with Bovanne she should be dancing with the Reverend. They say she was dancing too close, that her dress is too low, and the hem is too high for a woman of her age, and that she should not be drinking. They reveal to her that what she was really brought to the benefit for was to organize the "council of elders." Hazel is so disgusted with them that she takes Bovanne home with her where she plans to give him a bath and a rubdown.

Obviously, as my own summary shows, this is a very hard story to summarize or re-write without losing almost all of its impact. Therefore, one way I have of helping students to see the literary quality of the story is to have them try to re-write it (in their journals) in one of several ways:

1. Tell the story from the point of view of one of Hazel's children.
2. Re-write the story using an omniscient point of view.
3. Make Hazel white and give her a white middle class dialect.
4. Tell a similar story with the Hazel character changed to a male
5. Summarize the story.

Following is an example of one student's summary:

> "My Man Bovanne" is a story of an older woman (about 61) and the discrimination she and an old blind man confront from her children. The children are ready to fight for black power and equal rights but they are not yet ready to accept the elderly and the handicapped. This is one of the reasons Hazel probably wanted to act young, so that they wouldn't push her out. But once she starts to dance with this blind man again the children's prejudices show. So Hazel in a last desperate act to

show her children she and the blind man are still alive ran off with him. She and he could create a life of their own and not depend on anyone but themselves.

Notice that what this student really does is more of a commentary than a summary, but nonetheless the writer shows some good insights into possible interpretations of the story. The second example of summary attempt has less interpretation and makes good use of direct language from the story. It thus captures more of the "flavor" of the story as written by Bambara:

According to her daughter, Hazel is apolitical. From what I gathered from the story the rest of the characters are supporting Black Power or Black party or something like that. I chose to summarize this story in my own words because it seems too long to put into the words of an omniscient narrator.

At the beginning, Hazel tells how blind people have a hummin' Jones, or need to hum. Then at this benefit she asks "My Man Bovanne" to dance. So Hazel and this blind guy are dancing around chest to chest and Hazel's son John Lee comes up and frowns his disapproval at he.. Then her daughter and her other son both express their embarrassment at how she's dancing too close to this blind guy and they take her into the kitchen to talk to her. Then they all gang up on her saying she was dancing like a bitch in heat. It is then that she finds out that she's supposed to organize the council of elders. Her children tell her that her dress is too low cut and the hem's too high for a woman her age and that she shouldn't be drinking. Hazel gets fed up with all the hassling she's getting so she gets up to leave. Then Task, her son tells her she is supposed to talk to Reverend Trent about some nonsense. Anyway they decide to talk about all this at dinner the next night (taking Hazel's cooking for granted). They leave Hazel standing alone in the kitchen, and then Bovanne comes in and Hazel takes him on out of there (not minding the nasty looks she gets) to her house thinking about giving him a sponge bath, and a rubdown, and a massage. "Cause you gots to take care of the older folks."

One additional writing assignment I asked students to do after their re-writing of "My Man Bovanne" was to write a few paragraphs comparing their version with the original and commenting on the difficulty they had in writing it. Here is a summary along with a comment on the difficulty:

The setting was about 15 years ago, a demonstration possibly on discrimination. Hazel Peoples was there, a kind motherly black lady in her 60's. Her children were at the demonstration and her daughter Joe Lee was one of the leaders.

Hazel asks Blind Man Bovanne to dance out of kindness. She states that he is not her man. The children seem to be upset that their mother is dancing so close with this blind man.

They confront her in the kitchen telling her she should be ashamed and should be dancing with the Reverend. Hazel plays dumb to what they are saying. When Bovanne enters the kitchen they leave together having other plans than dancing in mind. This is a very ironic story. The demonstration is about discrimination of blacks. At the same time the children are discriminating against Hazel for being old.

This story is hard to summarize because it loses a lot of its meaning without the slang and accents the author put in it. I think if it had been written in plain English it wouldn't have been half as good!

Notice how the following student writer combines summary with commentary on the character of Hazel and her actions. It turns out to be something like a character sketch:

Miss Hazel is a black woman who is in her early sixties and is kind of fat and has meat hanging from her bones as she would say. Hazel, though she is getting up in years, has not forgotten how to live though her children think she should. The children of Hazel have all grown and are now activists for the black cause. They feel blacks have been exploited long enough and that there should be some change. Hazel, though is content with her life and really couldn't give a damn. She will cook dinner for her children and the other activists.

Hazel is still sexually active and her children find it appalling. They just want her and other people her age to stand around and look "grass roots." There is nothing Hazel would rather do in life than just live. She decides to make a blind man named Bovanne her next companion and to give him a bath and a nice face massage, to rub out all the worry lines on his forehead.

Following is one of the most succinct of the summaries:

Hazel asks the blind man Bovanne, to dance at a political rally. She is enjoying herself and dancing very closely with him when one of her children pulls her back into the kitchen. Her other children are back there and they all lay into her for acting like a hussy. Her children are disgusted by her actions and Hazel is disgusted with them. She leaves with Bovanne.

The author of the above summary wrote the following, longer, commentary on the difficulty of writing the summary:

I tried over and over to adequately tell the story both through creativity and summary. As you can see, I got a little frustrated and didn't come up with much. I couldn't express the true underlying themes of how her children, while fighting for people's rights and causes, can't understand their mother's compassion for Bovanne. I still can't adequately express this in this explanation of what happened when I tried to retell the story.

One student refused to re-write the story and wrote this explanation. Note that she thought the dialect was central:

> I tried to re-write the story "My Man Bovanne" in third person omniscient. However, my attempts to do so failed miserably and I was reduced to writing a mere summary. Here is why I could not do it.
>
> "My man Bovanne" was written by Toni Cade Bambara, a black woman. She wrote the story in Black English Variant. For someone who has only spoken standard American English this made the story somewhat hard to read. Re-writing it was almost impossible. I felt that it should be re-written also using Black English Variant for the omniscient narrator because only BEV could do it justice. To write it in standard American English would not let the story flow and, in my opinion, would lessen the effect of the story.

This next example contains a particularly satisfying summary with some interpretation:

> "My Man Bovanne" is a story amout a lady compassionate enough to give a little time to someone who has given his time to everyone else. Bovanne has fixed and repaired things for kids in the neighborhood and he never asked for anything in return. Miss Hazel picked up on his sensitivity which gave her the courage to ask him to dance. Her children gave her a verbal reprimand in the kitchen, and told her that her performance was of a female dog in heat. Her children are self-centered and only care about their own emotions. If she wants to dance with Bovanne that is her business. She shouldn't care what her children say. So after they leave the kitchen she listened to her mind and leaves the dance with Bovanne. Emotions come before appearance, pride, or age.

Not many students actually rewrote the entire story from another point of view or with a main character of another race or sex. Some started but quit when they realized the difficulty. Then even they often wrote interesting essays about why they couldn't finish. But some did finish very interesting complete revisions. Here is a version told by Elo, the most critical of the daughters:

> Damn! I don't believe it! Mama is again dancing with that blind dude Bovanne! Why? Why does she have to humiliate her family and the Cause this way? I can just see old Whitey there with a grin on his face, and he be saying somn' like "See what'd I tell you? Them porch monkeys are so horny it takes the grave to finally get 'em off each other!"
>
> And with Bovanne! He's a Tom, a breed of blacks we don't need anymore, that we can't afford to adnowledge. Hustlin' up to Whitey for some bread! It's just slavery in another form, that's all. Well, soon Whitey'll get what's comin....
>
> Good, Joe Lee and Task are given me the sign to get Mama the hell off the dance floor and into the kitchen. Here we go, and with any luck we might be able to talk some sense into her

fool head. The Cause is gonna run into trouble because of this. I can see Reverend Trent now, listening with a smirk on his face as Mama talks to him, and him thinkin' all the time, "Sure, Mrs. Peoples, I'm supposed to support your family and your Cause when you don't even support God's ways!"

Great, now that we got her in the kitchen, its damn plain that she's damn well drunk, and I damn well say so. How Task try to comfort her, no way.

"Mama, you was dancin' like a bitch in heat," I say. And it's the truth.

Great, now she start to cry, thinkin' it'll get us off her back. No way. I start to tell Joe Lee my feelings on Bovanne, that good-for-nothing Tom. He used to be cool when I was little, used to fix my skates and stuff, but now he's turned into a regular Tom, beggin' old Whitey to help the poor black people.

"... the generation gap ...? I hear Mama say.

Generation gap! I says. For the Negro people? "WE don't have any dry generation gap. That is a white phenomenon for a white society, the negro ..."

Joe Lee tells me to cool down, 'cause Mama wouldn't understand what I was saying anyway. He's right.

Great, now Task sayin' how short Mama's skirt is, what she be doin' wrong ... The only way to get anythin' through her fool head is to tell her directly, so I say, "Mama, you're going to be tryin' to help the Cause with a wig on your head, your boobs out, and that hem up to your ass. People will say "Ain't that the horny bitch that was grindin' with the blind dude?" I just look at it and see Whitey's smilin' face. She should do a cornrow, be proud of her heritage. So I tell her.

Of course, she ain't listenin' to me! Well I tried to be nice, I tried to comfort her, and this is what I get. Oh damn! I walk out the door and try to set up for Tamie's speech.

It's amazing how Mama can be so apathetic about the Cause. Here we are trying to make a better future for all Negroes, and there she ...

There she goes, out the door with Bovanne. Damn! I hope she at least has enough sense to fix tomorrow's benefit dinner!

And here is this same writer's very insightful essay on both the difficulty of doing what she did and the character of Elo:

In rewriting the story to correspond to Elo's viewpoint, the first thing I had to keep in mind was that Elo was a woman, but one totally devoted to the cause of Black Power. Her only goal in life, like many blacks of that time period, just seemed to be acquiring the same rights and material benefits that Elo saw the white people enjoying. It wasn't an unreasonable cause: it was a long-overdue one, but for Elo it seemed to occupy her entire life. She was the kind of character or so it seemed to me, who lived for the Cause, and would let no one or nothing stand in her way, but at the same time forgetting the feelings of others, including people who were important to her.

Elo's annoyance with Hazel, the way I interpreted the story, rested solely with her mother's refusal to "give in" to the way she was expected to act. Elo would not have minded it as much if Mama's refusal wouldn't be hurting the Cause, but as it stands now it is, and this is more than Elo can stand to hear. Elo in the story seemed to shift back and forth between proper English and "jive" talk, and this occurs whenever her temper flares up. When she has a chance to collect her thoughts, even for a moment, her voice is steady and clipped, otherwise she starts talking in the jargon she grew up with. Elo's character was a difficult one to write about, but it was a challenge made easier through Bambara's clear writing. Based on my interpretation of the story, this is how I believe Elo would feel and think during the time of the story.

Finally, a student's version written from an omniscient point of view:

The party was well underway. There was plenty to eat and drink: and someone had put on some records and cleared a place to dance. Everyone was having a good time.

The woman had finished her fourth glass of the punch — it had been spiked — when she saw the old blind man in the corner. She had been wanting to dance all evening, so she headed toward him.

A few eyes glanced at them as they started to the dance floor but no one said anything to either of them. They wrapped their arms around each other, and their bodies were as close together as they could be. They swayed together like that for several songs, no matter if they were fast or slow.

After a few songs, the woman's oldest son caught her eye and frowned as if to say, "Behave." Pretty soon her daughter gave her a nasty look.

The old woman looked the other way to ignore them: she was having a good time. She felt a hand grab her arm, and the next thing she knew, she was being drug off the dance floor and into the kitchen.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked him. Then she saw the rest of her children and she know something was wrong.

"What do you think you're doing out there?" her oldest son asked angrily. "Just what do you think you are doing?"

The woman looked shocked that her son would speak to her in that tone of voice. "I was dancing, not that it should matter to you," she replied.

"You were acting like a bitch in heat." Her daughter looked at her accusingly.

The old woman looked away and blinked as if to stop herself from crying. Her children continued to gang up on her.

"You are embarrassing yourself -- and us — being out there like that." Once again the younger of her sons spoke.

"I'm not embarrassed," was her honest reply.

"Mother, you know how important this meeting is for all of us. And you come here, in that dress — which is entirely

too short and too tight—and make a spectacle of yourself. How do you expect us to feel when people are pointing their fingers at our mother and make comments like 'Look at that old woman out there.'" This time it was her oldest son speaking.

"How old am I?" she asked them.

They all ignored her question, and the younger son started telling her what he wanted her to do. "We need you to talk to the Reverend about using his basement for our headquarters."

"You want me to do that with the Reverend?" she asked.

Her daughter looked at her in disgust and left the kitchen. The two sons decided to get together and talk about it, then they left also.

The old woman was alone in the kitchen wondering what she had done to deserve such treatment. Then she heard his voice.

"You in here?" It was the old blind man.

"Yes," she replied as she took his arm, "but we're leaving."

"Where are we going?"

"My place," she said with a smile. And they left.

What does all of this prove? Well, that students can improve both their writing and their understanding of literature by writing about literature, and especially by getting new insights into the writer's craft by writing and re-writing themselves. Not only their re-writing, but I also find interesting their writing about problems with the re-writing and with the results and what that tells about the quality of the original. In the student's own words:

> I tried to write a summary and it was hard because I couldn't fit all of the messages into it without spoiling the whole story. It had a lot to say about age, politics, and relationships between family and friends. I couldn't capture all there was to say without going into a deep analysis of the story. I think no one can write a truly accurate summary of a story without actually copying from the author.
>
> Trying to retell this story is a bit complicated because, you have to try to be Miss Hazel and I don't feel that Toni is getting us acquainted enough with the character, as far as her inner feelings. I don't know enough about the character of Miss Hazel. Also I feel that I have to experience the same thing or something similar to put myself in the character's position. This would then enable me to retell it. I don't know, it is just complicated. There are so many points in the story. The author has you focusing on everyone's emotions.
>
> I don't understand the black culture completely because one can't if they are not black, and to try and affect the speech no less would only end up as a pathetic parody. One really should not write about experiences that aren't their own, because no matter how insightful or vicarious an animal one is, something will always be lacking. It may be a mood, or a discreet article of language. Whatever, the missing piece will cause a whole work to fall in ungenuiness.

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> As I think back to my summary of "My Man Bovanne" I recall some difficulty in doing so. Right after I read the story I thought I had a good summary in mind. As I began to write however, and check points out in the book, I'd find that things were not as clear as I had thought they were. The story seems almost like a poem.
>
> In rewriting "My Man Bovanne" a clearer version of the story comes to the surface. The story must be torn apart in order to write it again and here is when the story becomes understandable. In the re-write an examination of each section must be made and an understanding of the characters must be developed. The story must be looked at very carefully, and interpreted in our own words.

What do students learn by attempting to re-write a good story? First of all, they learn once more how hard it is to write really well. Second, they learn much about point of view and how essential an "authentic" voice is. Third, they learn the almost absolute dependence voice has on the language in which the story is told. Fourth, they learn how much skill it takes to develop a well-rounded character (like Hazel). Fifth, they learn what a delicate balance there must be between all of the above elements and the action — something Aristotle observed long ago in *The Poetics*. Finally, they gain a new appreciation for the writer and her craft. Combine all of these things with the student's own coming to know and with their improvement in writing through re-writing and finally through writing about the process — it's an assignment that is hard to beat!

A Matter of Style: Developing Awareness Through Writing

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Style is one of the most elusive topics for students. Although they can see that Shakespeare is different from Spenser, Milton from Pope, and Hemingway from Faulkner, they have difficulties specifying what elements make the different styles unique. All the

while, however, they are concerned with developing their own styles, and often they haven't the least idea how to go about it. To help students see the complicated richness of different styles and help them do new things with their own writing, I have my students do the following assignment: treat the same topic, using three different styles.

The first thing I do as a part of this unit is explain the differences among the formal, moderate, and colloquial styles. We approach these styles by means of such elements as sentence structure and diction. Thus, I have a chance to explain such things as parallelism and periodic sentences, and the students have a chance to see the elements of each style organized on the board. Many students are surprised to see how the styles blend into each other. Although we discuss these stylistic elements as ways to approach other people's writing, I tell them that, in general, I emphasize a moderate-to-formal style.

Next, I read some sample student papers from previous classes. For instance, I had a student whose sisters once put her in a dryer and she talked about this experience in the style of the Bible, in the style of Huckleberry Finn, and in the style of John Donne. Another student chose Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and wrote about sections of this book in the style of *Beowulf*, in the style of *The National Enquirer* — complete with headlines and pictures — and in the style of a lawyer. Since I teach a rhetoric class for pre-law students, the legal style provides much discussion — especially since I try to move students away from legalese and toward good, clear writing. Students, on the whole, find some of these mixtures of situations and styles extremely funny and, more importantly, see the styles in a way they hadn't before.

Then it's time for the students to think about trying their own paragraphs in different styles. However, even though they know what it is they are supposed to do, they're not sure how they are supposed to go about doing it. Thus, I pass out a worksheet with samples of distinctive styles. We begin with Matthew 1:1-5:

> The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
> 2 Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren;
> 3 And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram;
> 4 And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon;
> 5 And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab; and Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse.

The first things that the students notice are that the word *begat* is repeated and that the person who is begotten begins the next part of the progression. They point out that the word *and* connects each part of the progression with the next one, and they trip over many of the names. Once they have a grasp of these several features, they find it easy to imitate this style, and they come up with some delightful names.

Another style that students have an easy time approaching is that of Sir Thomas Malory. I usually give the following to my students:

> Sone aftir that Kynge Arthure was com from Rome into Ingelonde, than all the knyghtys of the Rounde Table resorted unto the kynge and made many joustys and turnementes. And som there were that were but knyghtes encresed in armys and worshyp that passed all other of her felowys in prouesse and noble dedys, and that was well proved on many.
>
> But in especiall hit was prevyd on sir Launcelot de Lake, for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghtes, and at no tyme was he ovircom but yf hit were by treson other inchauntement.[1]

The first thing that students usually notice is the fifteenth-century spelling — and, by the way, they have a field day imitating it. They also point out the archaic language, e.g., "And som there were that were but knyghtes" (149). We discuss King Arthur's Court, and students talk about the possibilities of including jousts, knights, and the figures of King Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot. Many students like to use this style to talk about struggles for grades as well as sports competitions between rival schools.

A third easy style to imitate is that of Samuel Beckett, particularly parts of *Waiting for Godot:*

> Estragon: That's the idea, let's abuse each other.
> Vladimir: Moron!
> Estragon: Vermin!
> Vladimir: Abortion!
> Estragon: Morpion!
> Vladimir: Sewer-rat!
> Estragon: Curate!
> Vladimir: Cretin!
> Estragon: Crritic!
> Vladimir: Oh!
> Estragon: Now let's make it up.
> Vladimir: Gogo!
> Estragon: Didi!
> Vladimir: Your hand!
> Estragon: Take it!
> Vladimir: Come to my arms![2]

Students quickly pick up the strategy here, i.e., that Vladimir and

Estragon keep copying each other, playing games in order to pass the time as they wait for Godot. I usually get rapid-fire responses to dormitory food and long lines at registration.

Then the students can proceed to more difficult styles. For example, Psalms 29:1-7 gives a chance to discuss the merits of repetition, figurative language, and pacing:

> Give unto the Lord, O ye mighty, give unto the Lord glory and strength.
> 2 Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name: worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.
> 3 The voice of the Lord is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the Lord is upon many waters.
> 4 The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
> 5 The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars; yea, the Lord breaketh the cedars of Lebanon.
> 6 He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn.
> 7 The voice of the Lord divideth the flames of fire.

Students point out that the repetition of *Give unto the Lord* and *The voice of the Lord* gives a sense of accumulation, underscoring the omniscience and omnipresence of God. We talk about how this section is different from the passage in Matthew, discussing the different intentions, the more poetic style of praise. Students search for figurative language and immediately come up with two similes: "like a calf" and "like a young unicorn." Not only do students discuss why these two similes are appropriate for this passage, but they become confident about trying similes of their own. Certainly students have to work through clichés, surprised at first to find that their similes are, in fact, worn. But, once they break through that barrier, they can relax and show their own personalities through their description. Finally, students see that *O ye mighty* and *yea* vary the pacing, and they get some idea about the effect they can achieve with these interrupters.

I also have the students experiment with the style of Homer. Most students are familiar with *The Odyssey* and some with *The Iliad;* however, most have not gotten past the experiences that Odysseus has, say, with Polyphemos. I usually work with the following section:

> So long-suffering great Odysseus slept in that place in an exhaustion of sleep and weariness, and now Athene went her way to the district and city of the Phaiakian men, who formerly lived in the spacious land, Hypereia, next to the Cyclopes, who were men too overbearing, and who had kept harrying them, being greater in strength.

> From here
> godlike Nausithoös had removed and led a migration, and settled in Scheria, far away from men who eat bread, and driven a wall about the city, and built the houses, and made the temples of the gods, and allotted the holdings.[3]

We talk about the long sentences, the *ands* that keep the sentences moving, the names of gods and goddesses, the strange and often fanciful place names, and, of course, Odysseus himself. Once students get going on this style, there's no stopping some of them. They are quick to come up with imaginative monsters, place names, and adventures. Of course, these students live in the age of MTV.

Students also like to imitate the style of James Joyce. I give them the opening of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:*

> Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo. . . .
>
> His father told him [Stephen Dedalus] that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.
>
> He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.
>
> *O, the wild rose blossoms*
> *On the lilie green place.*
>
> He sang that song. That was his song.[4]

Students immediately point out the "once upon a time" beginning, keying in on the idea that we get a small boy's world. We get baby talk: "moocow" (7), "nicens little boy named baby tuckoo" (7). Indeed, we have a small boy's perspective. For example, Stephen's father has a "hairy face" (7) rather than a beard. Students are eager to experiment with children's songs or just parts of songs. They also like taking a child's perspective, using short sentences, and talking about childhood experiences.

Two more difficult styles include those of Henry James and William Faulkner. I usually teach two paragraphs from *The Portrait of a Lady:*

> She [Isabel Archer] had taken all the first steps in the purest confidence, and then she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley, with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness, from which the world would seem to lie below one, so that one could look down with a sense of exaltation and advantage, and judge and choose and pity, it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression, where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and served to deepen the feeling of failure.[5]

> The old gentleman [Mr. Touchett] at the tea-table, who had come from America thirty years before, had brought with him, at the top of his baggage, his American physiognomy; and he had not only brought it with him, but he had kept it in the best order, so that, if necessary, he might have taken it back to his own country with perfect confidence. But at present, obviously, he was not likely to displace himself; his journeys were over, and he was taking the rest that precedes the great rest. He had a narrow clean-shaven face, with evenly distributed features, and an expression of placid acuteness. It was evidently a face in which the range of expression was not large; so that the air of contented shrewdness was all the more of a merit. (7)

Students notice the long sentences, the involved sentence structures, the formal diction, but they have a hard time imitating the style. Yet the students' struggles, I find, are well worth it. Attempting to imitate this style in a fine way for the students to learn to vary their own sentence structures and widen their vocabularies. And the following sonnet by Lucy Shawgo, which originally appeared in *Plains Poetry Journal,* is a fitting way to end the discussion on James:

To Henry James

> Dear Henry, with your predilection for
> The fancy word like *physiognomy,*
> You couldn't face the books whose sales now soar
> Or even countenance in small degree
> Protagonists with sex lives so intense
> They haven't time for trips abroad to spread,
> Much less to promulgate, our innocence.
> (These heroes find a broad and stay in bed.)
> How lucky you again have moved, i.e.,
> Expatriated to a place where games
> Involving words expand the Trinity
> To Father, Son, the Holy Ghost, and James;
> For less is said by novelists today
> Than even your ellipses have to say.[8]

I also use the opening paragraph from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury:*

> Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I [Benjy] could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.[9]

We talk about point of view, since these lines are spoken by Benjy, who is retarded, and we discuss how the structures of the sentence reflect his fragmented thoughts. Students are quick to point out the repetition in this paragraph as well.

Once we discuss these various styles in class, the students have a daily work assignment and imitate three styles of their choice. We put some of these on the board, and I have students go into the distinctive features of each style. We talk about how we can tell that a student is imitating a particular style. Then I have the author explain his intentions. Some students, of course, imitate the authors on the distinctive styles sheet, and others imitate such authors as Ernest Hemingway and J. D. Salinger. I review the students' written work as well, indicating other stylistic possibilities.

By then the students are ready to begin their papers, and many of them actually have fun. I recently had students imitate Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, Sylvia Plath, and Alice Walker. Certainly, to an extent, they end up imitating some of the superficial qualities of the writers, but the students begin to get an appreciation of what the writers were trying to do. They also begin to experiment with sentence structures, diction, and points of view, things either they would have been afraid to do or, worse still, wouldn't have thought of doing. Style is no longer elusive for students but is approachable and, for some students, a whole new way of looking at writing.

Notes

[1] Sir Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 149. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[2] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1954), 48.

[3] Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 102.

[4] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964) 7. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[5] Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1979) 391-92. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[6] Lucy Shawgo, "To Henry James," *Plains Poetry Journal* 8 (1983): 17.

[7] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1946) 1.

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Hearing the Voice: A Study of Hemingway's Style

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Style is one of the most difficult aspects of writing to teach to high school students. While discussing a literary work with our classes, we often choose either to ignore the author's style entirely or to analyze the style briefly while explaining difficult passages or words to befuddled students. When it is time to have students write about what they have read, those of us who claim that we are using the masters as literary models once again find it easier to tell students to incorporate the author's "message" or "theme" in their writing instead of encouraging them to imitate the style of someone who is fairly easy to imitate, such as Ernest Hemingway. On the other hand, I feel that those of us who, without some pedagogical purpose in mind, simply tell our students to imitate an author's style are also committing a grievous error. As an American literature instructor, I shudder at the prospect of turning out a multitude of students who write office memos like Thomas Wolfe or autobiographies on job applications like Ernest Hemingway.

What, then, is the wisest and "safest" approach to take when using an author's style as the basis of a writing assignment? Before the students begin writing their literary imitations, I feel that the instructor should explain that the rules which govern informative writing may not pertain at all to creative writing. Thus, what may pass as a "good sentence" in a classification essay, for example, may be totally inappropriate in a poem or short story. This is the point at which students need to be told that the choices a writer makes regarding diction and sentence structure constitute a

writer's style, or voice. One way of training students to listen to the writer's voice is to engage them in a writing exercise that requires them to disguise the writer's voice by altering his style. The purpose behind this exercise is three-fold:

1. To teach students the three methods of expanding sentences: modification, subordination and coordination.
2. To teach students the difference between "learned" (i.e., formal) words and colloquial (i.e., conversational) words.
3. To help students discover their own voice as writers by making them aware of the components of style and of the importance of making consistent choices regarding diction and sentence structure.

Ernest Hemingway's deceptively simple style easily lends itself to such a writing assignment. Hemingway's unswerving belief in the "one true sentence" that is devoid of ornamentation resulted in a highly personalized style that has been called "lean" and "masculine." After students realize that Hemingway's masculine style is perfectly suited to his "macho" themes, they can then begin to distort Hemingway's style — and his purpose — by changing the words and the sentences. By the time they have completely revised a paragraph from one of Hemingway's short stories by formalizing his style, most students should be able to see that Hemingway's strong, clear voice has become muffled under the weight of all those modifiers, phrases and clauses.

For the past several years, I have "warmed students up" for this assignment by having them help me to revise on the board the climactic paragraph from Hemingway's "Indian Camp" where Nick Adams, his uncle and his father discover that the "proud father" of a baby boy has committed suicide:

> He pulled back the blanket from the Indian's head. His hand came away wet. He mounted on the edge of the lower bunk with the lamp in one hand and looked in. The Indian lay with his face toward the wall. His throat had been cut from ear to ear. The blood had flowed down into a pool where his body sagged the bunk. His head rested on his left arm. The open razor lay, edge up, in the blankets.

Since most of these sentences are short, declarative sentences, the instructor may want to begin changing Hemingway's voice by combining the first two sentences through subordination. This is the most common suggestion that I usually receive from the class: "After he pulled back the blanket from the Indian's head, his hand came away wet." As a rule, the entire class catches on to what we are doing after we have combined the first two sentences, and I

sense their enthusiasm mounting as the realization hits them that they are doing what they have been forbidden to do during most of their career as students: they are tampering with authority, in this case, the text of a literary work.

Having reduced the eight short sentences to four or five long sentences, we continue the process of "fattening up" Hemingway's style by adding adjectives and adverbs. This is the most tedious part because we sometimes have to vote on what the most appropriate modifier for a particular noun or verb would be. By now, the students are doing what I would like for them to do in their expository essays: they are consciously thinking about every word and every sentence that they write down. The resulting arguments that may arise now and then over a modifier are helpful in that they make students aware that what may sound "right" to one writer may not sound "right" to another because every writer has his/her own individual voice.

The final stage of the process — revising the diction — may be the most difficult one for high school students because most of them write the way they speak, and very few of them use "learned" (i.e., formal) words in their conversations. This may be an opportune time to introduce students to the thesaurus. All the instructor has to do is to read the various synonyms for a word like "cut" (e.g., "incise," dissect," "sever," "slice," etc.) and he has shown students that the first word that pops into their head is not the only choice that is available to them.

Afer the class and the instructor have finished expanding Hemingway's sentences and refining his diction, the result will probably have the same qualities as the following example:

> After he slowly removed the covering from the Indian's clammy head, his quivering hand came away moist and dripping. He mounted cautiously on the periphery of the lower bunk with the sputtering lantern and slowly peered at the horror within. The pathetic Indian, who lay with his visage toward the wall, had his throat brutally severed from one ear to the other. The blood, which had now thoroughly coagulated, had oozed into a pool where his lifeless body depressed the hideous pallet, and his head reclined peacefully on his left arm. The open razor lay gleaming, edge forward, in the bloody, sticky blankets.

Most students will realize that Hemingway's simple honesty has been replaced by artificiality and pretentiousness; therefore, the instructor must remind them that even though this style is far too flabby for Hemingway's macho prose, it may be suitable for informative or argumentative writing. At the completion of the on-the-board exercise, the class should be ready to "destroy" another

paragraph from this story or a different one on their own. The instructor may want the students to revise a paragraph in which Hemingway employed his method of coordinating several sentences with the use of "and."

Hemingway took pride in his ability to convey reality without resorting to what he called "tricks." However, since most students will be more likely to do expository and argumentative writing instead of creative writing in their lifetimes, they need to know some of the ways to manipulate readers that Hemingway chose to do without. Hemingway discovered his voice as a writer; it is one of our duties as English teachers to help our students to find theirs.

From Poetry to Journal to Creative Response: An Introductory Strategy

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"Poetry! I swear it would be easier to teach Russian to a herd of brontosauruses than to teach poetry to high school students, and it wouldn't be nearly as frustrating."

How often have English instructors harbored such feelings when faced with the threat of teaching that unit of poetry that should be included in one semester of literature? The fact is that too often the experience of teaching a unit on poetry has become a frustration for both student and instructor. In the eyes of the instructor, students appear to be denser than the brontosaurus — "they can't handle surface meaning, much less grasp the 'hidden meaning' " — and instructors, like it or not, militantly, religiously dish out those spoonsful of aesthetic experiences, desperately hoping for the miracle "osmosis." Since the miracle isn't likely to happen, teachers must take action.

I would like to share a teaching strategy for an introductory unit on poetry, one that I have found to be more fun than the idea of attempting to teach Russian to that herd of brontosaurus. It touches on students' prior knowledge with reference to the concept of poetry and aims to put them at ease with the idea of poetry. My method starts with the reading of poetry and moves quickly to student writing.

Since poets are masters of words, I begin with an emphasis on the power of words. I ask students to keep a "word awareness journal" making continual entries, as they read, of words, phrases, lines of prose or poetry (their own or someone else's) that have helped bring meaning alive through description, sensory imagery, unusual word choice, or syntax. Often the students enter their own words or those of classmates in addition to quotations from poetry. This practice helps them become more conscious of word power and less threatened by an adept poet's use of words. The journal is central to my most successful assignment, exercises based on lexicons. The idea is to let students play with words, to help them become aware of how words can be manipulated to express ideas more vividly and creatively.

Following are sample lexicons I have used throughout the poetry study unit as a springboard to creative writing, the generation of original free verse poems. Below the lexicon is an example of how one may manipulate words and structure to get an idea across more effectively. After the class examines the sample on an overhead, I cover up the bottom half and have the students create their own free verse poem from the given word list. During this time, I work with individual students encouraging them to try different word forms, word combinations, and structures. At the end of the class I collect their poems and give them another lexicon to work on at home.

Writing Assignment One

Create a free verse poem using the following lexicon.

1. You may use any word more than once.
2. You may use any *form* of the given word.
3. You need not use all of the given words.
4. You may add a *maximum* of 3 of your own words.

unite gulls in crash
foam
sky
silhouette meet
slap crust
against
cry boat down
shore the
swoop to
surf

* * *

1. gulls
   swoop down to meet
   the slap of the surf
   racing silhouettes
   against the crusted
   shore

2. Gulls, screaming,
   swoop down to meet
   the slap of the surf
   racing silhouettes toward
   the crusted shore

3. Gulls screaming
   swoop down to meet
   the slap of the surf
   silhouettes racing
   the crusted shore

4. Screaming
   Gulls swoop to meet
   The slap of the surf,
   Silhouettes racing
   The crusted shore

Because students enjoy seeing the results of these exercises, I prepare transparencies of their work, making certain to include at least one line, if not the whole poem, from every student. Following are a few samples from recent student efforts:

Samples of Student Writing

The gulls' silhouette crush against the sky
Uniting with the shore and surf

The gull's silhouettes
Slapped the sky foam
Crashing, swooping down into the crust . . .

The gulls unite in the sky:
Silhouettes meet
Crying to the night.
The surf crashes against shore
The boats meet
The ocean's roar.

Gulls unite — swoop down,
to the cry of a foamy surf
slapping the shore;
united gulls
silhouette a sky —
a sky met against a crying shore —

United the gulls cry,
Swooping and crashing in the sky,
While below the surf meets the shore.

The results may not be earth-shattering. Poets we do not claim to be. But, the students have taken that first step in word awareness, and most have found the experience not only nonthreatening, but fun. Because I usually teach the poetry unit early in the dreary month of February, you will notice that the word selection leans toward simple summer themes, a promise of things to come.

Writing Assignment Two

Create a free verse poem using the following lexicon.

1. You may use any word more than once.
2. You may use any *form* of the given word.
3. You do not need to use all of the given words.
4. You may add a *maximum* of 3 of your own words.

slap
sweat
glisten
muscle
pavement race
bulge
I
the
jog strain
batter
silhouette
leg
my
free
as
sneakers
shadow
sunset
ache in
dream
harmony
wind
cool
of
against
trickle

Student Responses

My battered sneakers raced against the pavement
My bulging muscles ached; sweat trickled down my legs
The cool wind slapped against my body
I awoke from my dream in a cold sweat.

Muscles strain.
Sweat glistens.
Sneakers slap
Sunset shadows
Against pavement.
Jogging free.
Cool wind
Against the ache.

The sound of my sneakers
Batters endlessly against
The pavement.
I am alone.

Shadowed sunsets
freely change
harmony of one's dreams

Sneakers slap the pavement
Racing wind and
Shadows and
Dreams.

Muscles strain.

In the cool sunset shadows
Silhouettes flutter against
Battered pavements and
Aching dreams until
I race free from
Shadows of my dreams

Racing free
In harmony
Wind and Dream and Me

I ache as sweat glistens against my muscles.
The pavement cool as I race free.
My sneakers slap the pavement.
Legs in harmony.
Free of shadows.
Free of pain; free to be me.

Writing Assignment Three

Create a free verse poem using the following lexicon.

a. You may use any word more than once.
b. You may use any *form* of the given word.
c. You do not need to use all of the given words.
d. You may add a ***maximum*** of 3 of your own words.

bronze
woman
thunder
sand
salt
beautiful
flash
gulls
the
golden
etch
churl
bikini
wave
bake
glisten
on
men
sculpture
body
lie
distant
sea
smile
poise
beach
cry
eye
sailboat
sun
sound
wind

Student Responses

Baking in the sun, the beautiful golden
woman and the flashy bikini
attracted men on the beach.
Smiling and eyeing her, the men lay
on the beach poised.
Then the wind and thunder sounded.
The woman lay crying.
And the men cried too.

Gulls cry.
Salty winds etch sculptures on the sand.
Distant sailboats lie poised on the waves.
Fading sun smiles on the glistening sea.
— The beach at twilight —

Under the golden sun
Glistens a sailboat on the sea

Etched in woman's eye
Sculpture of distant figure
Handsome man in bikini
Bronzed body glistening with waterbeads.
Eye catches eye.
Smiles flash.
Thundering winds sound,
The smile cries
Wave catches wave.

I've had fun going from poetry to journal to creative writing and I think you can too. Enjoy! Teaching that formidable unit on poetry can be a piece of cake!

Teaching Robert Coover's "The Babysitter": Writing to Unlock Narrative Meaning

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The unconventional narrative Robert Coover employs in his short story "The Babysitter" provides the college literature instructor with ample opportunity to investigate matters of plot and story-telling technique in a work of experimental fiction. During the course of the story Coover provides us with several different and conflicting versions of the babysitter's evening. In one version, she spends a dull evening with the children and dozes off in front of the television; in the more extreme versions of her evening, she is raped, murdered, or responsible for the children's deaths. Coover's unusual narrative resembles the Japanese film *Rashomon*, in which the same story is told from several different perspectives; each perspective introduces twists and variations into the story-line that reflect the teller's biases. At first, Coover's unusual concantenation of narratives seems confusing, if not incoherent; but when we examine the story carefully, we discover that there is method in Coover's apparent madness.

The story has a strongly sexual theme. The teenage babysitter of the title is the focus of the major male characters' scabrous fantasies. Each character's fantasy constitutes one or another of the variant narratives that make up the story. Mr. Tucker, the children's father, seeks to overcome his midlife crisis by seducing or raping her. Her boyfriend Jack, and his friend Mark, want to visit her on the job and "make out a little" (Coover, 207). Four-year-old Jimmy Tucker wants to avenge himself on the sitter by spanking her. As we read, we follow their fantasies during the course of the evening and observe the logical consequences of their imagined fulfillment with horror and amusement.

Needless to say, this is a difficult story to teach. Students find it confusing and are uncertain what to make of Coover's multiple narratives. They find the apparent inconsistency of the multiple plots quite troublesome at first. For example, as Mr. Tucker nears the consummation of his lust for the sitter, complications develop in his fantasy. One variation of his fantasy ends as Jack and Mark interrupt a pleasant bathtub interlude with the sitter; in a second variation, his fantasy is left unfulfilled when he discovers her drowned corpse in the tub; in a third variation he accidentally kills the sitter during a rape attempt. Understandably, students want to know which of these variant plots is the "correct" version of the story. On the basis of viewpoint and internal evidence, we can determine whether a given version of the evening's events originates with the sitter, Jack, Jimmy, or Mr. Tucker. The story requires the reader to unravel these tangled plots. To complicate matters, the fantasies often impinge on one another — this allows Mr. Tucker to intrude on Jack's fantasy, and vice-versa, to comic and horrific effect. An instructor can help students trace through the multiple plots and uncover the order which lies behind the apparent chaos.

Each of the story's 107 short paragraphs is set off by asterisks. Each paragraph, then, is a discrete entity, helping carry forward one or another of the variant plots. I require the students to number each paragraph as they read. In this way, we can refer to paragraphs by number; this strategy helps students "unscramble" the story by determining which paragraphs seem to "belong together" — that is, which paragraphs constitute the thread of a given narrative in the larger context of the story. Since the paragraphs constituting each narrative are scattered throughout the story's thirty pages, this tactic of numbering paragraphs allows us to deal with the story's unorthodox structure with greater ease.

Class Discussion

The first day's discussion is usually devoted to answering students' questions and coping with their bewilderment at the story's convoluted plot. A large portion of the first class can be given over to an attempt to distinguish between real and imagined action in the story. Several of my classes have suggested that the one "real, true" account of the evening's activities is the dullest and most pedestrian of Coover's plots — that is, the simple story of a girl's ordinary evening spent babysitting unruly children and coping with a tiresome boyfriend. Students usually feel that the more extreme or melodramatic versions of the evening are fantasies. However, the variations on the babysitter's evening that are imagined by the boys and Mr. Tucker should not be dismissed. If the sexual fantasies of men and boys routinely feature rape and violence, what kind of statement is Coover making about the American male's psyche?

In the second day's class discussion, we examine the characters' fantasies concerning the sitter. What is Coover's intent in presenting them as he does? He implies a possible reason for the prevalent violence in his character's fantasies when he describes the evening's programming on the Tucker's television. The television becomes a character in the story, often providing an ironic commentary on the story's action. At times, though, the television's violent images recur in the characters' fantasies. For example, early in the story Coover describes a fist fight that takes place on a western program: "A hard blow to the belly. The face" (214). The language of this scene is anticipated when Jack imagines defending the babysitter from Mark: "He slams a hard right to the guy's gut, clips his chin with a rolling left" (Coover, 212). Later, after the imagined fight, Jack observes that "Mark is rubbing his jaw where he's just slugged him" (Coover, 216). The diction of these passages recurs in a later scene in which Jack tries to defend his girlfriend from Mr. Tucker. Jack "leans into the bastard with a hard right to the belly. Next thing he knows, though, he's got a face full of an old man's fist" (Coover, 230). While the TV may not directly inspire this violence, Coover does suggest that it can influence our fantasies, and possibly our actions as well.

Written Assignments

Require students to trace two different narrative lines through the story. This is an assignment in which those numbered paragraphs could prove useful. It's possible to pick out and designate

by number those paragraphs that carry forward a particular narrative thread. This assignment requires students to read and reread the story closely in order to trace out a particular plot progression. In doing this assignment, the students must deal with questions of viewpoint and consistency of plot and action. The exercise is similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle; the students are given the pieces of various plot-lines and must fit them together in a coherent, logical fashion. They can present their findings in a 3-4 page paper.

A longer assignment requires students to examine the role television plays in the story. What kind of comment on the action of the main story lines does the TV provide? The students should notice that parallels exist between the characters' real and imagined experiences and the programs that appear on television.

While "The Babysitter" is a demanding story with its convoluted plot, it is well within the grasp of the patient college undergraduate reader. The story is a literary jigsaw puzzle; to make sense of it, the reader must literally "put together" its scattered pieces. With its multiple plots, this story is the ancestor of the currently popular "choose your own adventure" books for children that allow the reader to select and trace out the variations on a single storyline. For undergraduates who grow up with such books, "The Babysitter" will seem almost homey and familiar.

Work Cited

Coover, Robert. "The Babysitter." In *Pricksongs and Descants.* New York: E. P. Duton, 1969.

Teaching Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery": A Sensitizing Approach

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Two areas of difficulty teachers frequently observe in the essays of their college freshmen are the inability to include sufficient and appropriate background information and the inability to manipulate ideas using formal structures. These problems correspond

directly to the students' facility for applying prior knowledge to textual content and perceiving interconnections among formal devices in reading texts. With this connection in mind, I have been exploring methods of reducing reading and writing problems by teaching to these areas of weakness common to both processes.

Using this approach, I have developed a series of inductive literary reading activities which sensitize students to the function of background knowledge and formal schemes in texts and which encourage them to address consciously these concerns in their own reading and writing. That the questions are inductive is an important difference between these activities and most reading exercises because the lessons are designed to develop internalized systems of knowledge about a text rather than to stimulate mere factual recall of the text. It is also important that the literary activities culminate in an extended writing assignment because the sensitivities established in the reading process can immediately be applied to parallel events in the writing process. The value of these activities is that they fashion a strategy for students to use in making connections among ideas and subsequently in structuring those ideas so that meaning in the texts they read and write becomes focused and communicative.

A short story that lends itself well to the teaching approach I use is Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Using exercises I have developed from this story as a model, I shall illustrate a typical reading-writing unit. Generally, each unit extends over a period of two weeks with three class sessions in each. During the first day of classes we set a background for the story. Then we skim the text and discuss it briefly with the aid of a pre-reading guide like the one that follows. The questions ask the students to observe certain ostensible features of the text and to make some initial predictions about the nature of the text based on this information. Both content and formal structural concerns are represented in the reading guide.

Thinking Before You Read

1. The title of Shirley Jackson's story is "The Lottery." What is a lottery?

   What can you predict about what will happen in the story based on this knowledge?

2. Our introduction tells us that Shirley Jackson wrote stories that were sometimes bizarre or terrifying.

   List the details from the first paragraph of the story.

Do these details seem consistent with what we've been told about Jackson's stories?

What does this information from the text suggest to you about the story?

3. We are told that this story has something to do with what we know about people in this small town. As you skim the text, list the first five names you encounter.

   Do these names seem typical to you? Based on this observation, can you predict that this story is talking about real-life characters?

4. In the introduction to our reader, we learn that an objective narrator like the one in this story tells the story by reporting action and quoting dialogue. Answer the following questions about narration based on what you observe in the text.
   a. Roughly how much of the text appears to be action?
   b. How much of the text involves dialogue?
   c. Explain how these devices occur in the text. Do you see long passages of action or long passages of dialogue? Which comes first? Are the action and dialogue mixed?

At the conclusion of the first class, the group is assigned as homework to read the story and complete all but the last few questions of a during-reading guide as they read. The questions slow down the reading activity and focus the students' attention on the details authors have chosen to include in the text and the way in which those details are arranged to show their specific relationship to one another in the context of the story. As the reading guide is completed and discussed on the second day of class, students focus on how details presented through repetitions, parallels, or other devices in the text aid their sense of prediction and allow them to construct meaning in conjunction with knowledge they had before they encountered the text.

Acting as You Read

1. There is basically one action taking place in the first three paragraphs of the story. In light of this activity, how would you entitle the first section?
2. List in order of their appearance in the text the groups of characters who engage in this action.
3. List two details the author gives about each group.
4. What do these details suggest to you about the people gathered?

* * * * *

1. What is the subject matter of the next set of four paragraphs?
2. Consider the paragraph about the original paraphernalia. What is the central object of focus in this paragraph?
3. What kind of information are we given about this object?

4. The box and the slips of paper are a central part of this ritual. List several things you learn about them in the third paragraph of this section. For instance, slips of paper were substituted for wood chips to make room for more names.

   Does this remind you of any similar event in your own life?

   What do these details suggest about the people's attitude toward the lottery?

5. Describe some of the "fussing" that was done to prepare for the lottery.

   How have these details changed over the years?

   Do all of the people know what needs to be done to prepare and conduct the lottery? Why?

* * * * *

What questions have you developed about the story at this point? How have your first impressions or beliefs about the story changed?

1. Section three of the story parallels one of the earlier sections in its content. What section does it resemble and how are the sections alike?
2. To what one character are we introduced in this section? Are there any details to suggest that this woman is special?
3. How would you describe the feelings suggested by the following details about Mrs. Hutchinson?

   her sweater over her shoulder
   "Clean forgot what day it was."
   people separated good-humoredly
   "Wouldn't have me leave m' dishes in the sink?"

* * * * *

1. What action takes place in the fourth section of the story? What title does this suggest for the section?
2. How does the amount of description and dialogue in this section compare with other parts of the story? How would you account for the differences?
3. How would you characterize the change in people's feelings in this section? Cite two specific examples or quotations from the text which indicate why you made this decision.
4. State briefly the procedure followed in conducting the lottery. What devices in the text stretch out these steps and yet keep your interest as each family draws from the box?
5. Several words in this section are italicized. Copy down the sentences in which you find these words and briefly explain their significance.

   eg. "Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for *them*." (Questioning the lottery is seen as the fault inspired by the foolishness of young people. The emphasis on *them* helps us to identify the source of the problem according to Old Man Warner.)

* * * * *

1. One might entitle the final section The Act. What takes place here to suggest such a title?
2. The children along with their parents pick up stones. Where earlier in the text did you observe this action?

   What were the children doing with the stones earlier?

   Contrast your understanding of their action now with your understanding at the time it was first mentioned. What did you think it meant then; what do you think it means now?
3. Several sentences indicate the willingness of all these people to cast stones. What details stand out as surprising considering Mrs. Hutchinson is the victim?
4. How does the description of the town in this final section contrast with the opening one?

   What questions are you left with at the end of the story?

   How has your first impression of the story been revised through your reading?

* * * * *

The third class session ends the reading cycle and begins the writing activity. Students begin the hour by responding individually to post-reading questions in writing and then discussing their final impressions of and questions about the story. The post-reading questions address the more problematic features of the text which result from observations about the work as a whole. In "The Lottery," for example, the ironic incongruities may create some difficulty for readers seeking consistency in form and perceiving inconsistency in detail. The question sequence allows the students to "work through" rough spots such as this using prior knowledge and information from the work.

Re-Thinking the Reading

One device used in this story to hold our interest and emphasize the author's main point is irony (expecting one thing to happen and experiencing its opposite). To observe and understand irony, we sometimes have to see an object or statement two different ways at the same time.

As you complete the questions below, consider how Shirley Jackson uses parts of her story to foreshadow or warn us of the irony.

1. Reconsider the first paragraph of the story. Given the details there, did you expect the lottery to be a happy occasion or a grim one? Why did you make that decision?

   Knowing the outcome of the story now, what details seem ironic in that paragraph? Explain why.
2. We decided earlier that the names in the story were realistic and described ordinary people. Is there anything about these names that points to the ironic nature of the story as well? List

the names that might be considered two ways at once. Tell what significance the name has to the story. For instance: *Martin* is a bird associated with bringing bad news.

3. When Mrs. Hutchinson arrives, she greets Mrs. Delacroix in a particular way. Write the sentence which describes this action below and indicate why it might be significant.
4. Consider the sections into which we divided the story. Diagram the action of "The Lottery" indicating whether the action is in the past or present, internal or external.
5. Write a paragraph in response to one of the questions sets below. Use specific details from the text as we have in the questions above to support the opening statement of your response.
   a. The introduction to this story suggests that "The Lottery" comments on something we know in each other and something we know about how evil works. What is the something we know about how evil works in ordinary people after we finish reading the story?
   b. "The Lottery," your text suggests, is a persuasive nightmare. Do you agree? Why? Consider the military draft or some other real-life experience along with some samples from the text to determine your answer.
   c. According to your text, "The Lottery" is an example of the destructive power of merely accepting a situation because of the way things use to be or because that is the way things are. Explain what is meant by such a statement. Support your explanation with details about one or two significant characters and their attitudes and actions in the text.

The post-reading questions begin the link with the writing activities by asking students to synthesize a number of impressions in a paragraph-length response. In this way, students strengthen their perceptions and begin to articulate them in writing with the needs of another reader in mind. The writing practice is extended by a composition assignment in which students are to write about some idea in the text they have just read. Prewriting for the essay follows the discussion of the post-reading questions so that students can explore ideas while they are still fresh. The activity requires students to list all they know about their topic as it is presented in the story and to draw connections between that information and information from their own experience to generate content for their essays.

As the students' essays are taken through the standard writing workshop procedures in the second week of the unit, the concerns of the first week will be continually reinforced. The essays are peer edited with special emphasis on elaboration of details, logical structure of ideas, and degree of predictability established for the reader. Through the editing process students reinforce their abil-

ities to monitor consistency of thought and structure in the text and apply that knowledge toward the revision of their own essays.

Combining literary reading and writing in this way is variously rewarding for both the students and the teacher. The skills which students develop in using background information and formal devices lead to more success in areas where they are typically evaluated by teachers such as reading comprehension and writing coherence, clarity, and elaboration. Students enjoy reading short stories more than academic essays and find a wealth of ideas to respond to in their reading. Most importantly, students make connections between reading and writing in a way they never have before, seeing one as being helpful to the other. They *confront* their reading and writing weaknesses and develop confidence in their ability to cope with them. And because the reading and writing tasks reinforce one another, their results seem more quickly accessible to students.

Teachers, likewise, are more satisfied. They no longer set up arbitrary expectations about performance and leave students to learn on their own. Rather, they work with the students to develop learning strategies which lead to success. This reduces frustration and fear of failure for both student and teacher. Teachers no longer see learning to read and write as a mysterious act. They can intervene openly in the thinking, reading, and writing processes of their students in progress — while it matters most. Consequently, teachers feel that their efforts in working with students make a difference. Finally, teachers assume a collaborative role with students rather than a combative one. Comments about the students' work can be directed toward developing more effective learning strategies rather than toward "marking down" the value of a product. Hence, the evaluations of students are conducive to still more academic growth and success.

The key to bringing literature into the composition classroom is remembering that the reading and writing concerns must enhance one another. It requires conscious effort from an instructor to avoid the somewhat natural inclination to explore only aesthetics in a literary text. Likewise, it is essential to emphasize the vital properties and uses of writing to prevent its merely becoming an ancillary activity devoid of meaning except to restate facts one wishes to recall later. The success of the approach finally depends on the teacher understanding how reading and writing truly are reinforcing processes.

A Frost Footnote to the Winter Issue

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In my article on Robert Frost in the most recent issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin*, I try to build a case for "The Road Not Taken" being a dynamic phenomenon for Frost throughout his life. For example, I offer the idea that towards the end of his life he was reading the poem to his audiences as a statement about himself, unlike his insistence during the early years that the poem be seen as a description of Edward Thomas. Frost was content, I suggest, for his Russian audience in 1962 to hear "The Road Not Taken" as a poem about the American poet. That at the time seemed like the best evidence I would find to support my viewpoint.

But not long before receiving my copy of the Winter *IEB* I was reading a new book, William H. Pritchard's *Frost: a Literary Life Reconsidered*, and discovered to my amazement that "The Road Not Taken" came very close to being the last poem Frost read in a public meeting (Pritchard, pp. 257-60). The occasion was his annual appearance at the Ford Forum at Jordan Hall in Boston in December, 1962. According to Pritchard, "that night he ended, rather abruptly, with 'The Road Not Taken' " (p. 259). It is highly unlikely that Frost wanted his audience to hear the poem that night as a statement about Edward Thomas. And neither did he want his audience that night to personalize or universalize the poem. He read the poem I think as a statement about himself.

Pritchard's phrase "rather abruptly" interests me. What was happening in the mind of the poet? Why the abrupt conclusion? Could it be that Frost, who on that occasion said he wasn't feeling well, omitted a poem or two that he had intended to read so that "The Road Not Taken" just might be the last poem an American audience would hear him read? There's considerable evidence that during the last months Frost strongly suspected that he was nearing the end of his life. If he had decided that the poem described his own life, and if he did think the talk might be his last, it was almost imperative that he end with "The Road Not Taken." (All of this is better evidence, of course, for my argument, but too late to add to my article.)

But I said earlier that the poem came close to being the last one an American audience heard him read. As was his custom, Frost

allowed time after his talk for members of the audience to ask questions and make requests. During that time someone asked him to read from "Two Tramps in Mud Time"; and Frost, perhaps still thinking of "The Road Not Taken" and his own life and vocation, "said" only the last stanza of the poem:

> But yield who will to their separation,
> My object in living is to unite
> My avocation and my vocation
> As my two eyes make one in sight.
> Only where love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes.

After reading that stanza Frost went on to talk about life's choices. Quoting Frost freely, Pritchard describes his closing remarks that December night in Boston, just days before his death: "It was all 'gamblin', and one had to bet nothing less than one's life; indeed, he said, one of the 'sweetest' of all expressions was 'You bet your sweet life.' There was 'nothing to life' unless one could say, 'I bet my sweet life on this' " (p. 260). Many years earlier Frost had gambled. Choosing one road rather than another, he bet his sweet life on poetry.

Topics for Future Issues

FALL 1985 **The Computer and English Teaching**
Deadline: June 30, 1985

WINTER 1986 **The English Teacher's Other Duties**
Deadline: September 30, 1985

SPRING 1986 **Teaching Thinking While Teaching Writing**
Deadline: November 30, 1985

Manuscripts should be sent in duplicate to Dorothy Matthews, 208 English Building, University of Illinois, 608 S. Wright, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

WANTED: Critical articles, book reviews, bibliographies of criticism and ideas for classroom use of Illinois authors — especially the writers for young adults: Richard Peck, Irene Hunt, Barbara Wersba and Lynn Hall. Send to above address.